



Title: **Fragile Learning**

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**Fragile Learning**

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PhD by Publication

2016

UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

**Fragile Learning**

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A thesis submitted to the University of Bedfordshire, in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Works.

The University of Bedfordshire  
Institute for Research in Education

August 2016

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I, DAVID MATHEW,

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

FRAGILE LEARNING

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### **Dedication**

Dedicated with love to Jackie Mathew.

### **Acknowledgement**

Respectful thanks are offered to Patrick Carmichael.

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**Abstract**

A critical exploration of seven peer-reviewed published papers supports the author's contention that learning in Higher Education is a fragile system of conscious and unconscious transactions that serve to weaken a process that is already precarious. Over the course of this essay and the accompanying papers, the submission is that learning is brittle, and easily broken. The Fragile Learner is described as someone close to conceding defeat to circumstances that threaten his education. The Fragile Learner might be a student of a Higher Education Institution, but also might be an appointed educator. Alongside notions of barriers to learning, this submission explores identities and tensions.

Although some of the ideas that make up my picture of Fragile Learning have been researched by other contributors (notably Meyer and Land; Britzman), my own contribution sees the complexities through various psychoanalytic lenses. Fundamentally, it is the addition of psychoanalysis that makes *Fragile Learning* original. It is argued that anxiety is an important part of adult learning. Fragile Learners might experience anxieties that are internal and complex but which appear to be attacks from other people. Alternatively, Fragile Learning might be a consequence of learners having suffered illness or indisposition. It is important that something can be blamed. The themes of fragility and anxiety – not to mention the difficulties that arise from distance learning – are present throughout.

## Chapter One: Fragile Learning

### Introduction

Those who teach will surely agree that one goal of the profession is to deliver content, task and atmosphere that leads to a learner's realisation and understanding. In certain contexts, this transaction might be confrontational; and in this sense alone, both education and psychoanalysis depend on what is referred to as a *meeting of minds*.

For example, in 'Conflict in Online Learning' (Chapter Seven), I argue for the positive effects of debate and aggression as building blocks of successful education. While endorsing similar views elsewhere, I additionally call attention to the violence of pedagogy. A 'meeting of minds' has an interpretation far removed from that of *calm intellectual agreement or compromise*. While Susan Carey (1986) elaborates on 'cognitive conflict' and the notion that to understand a subject, one must weave it into pre-existing knowledge schemata, Michael Oakeshott's approach is perhaps more philosophical, though no less based on impact. Oakeshott (1962) describes a 'conversation' that was begun in the primeval forests and which has been made more articulate over the course of centuries. Because we are civilized human beings, we have inherited this conversation; we have been bequeathed the responsibility of working collaboratively in every area of our intermingled lives, including in education.

'When two personalities meet,' writes Wilfred Bion,

an emotional storm is created. If they make sufficient contact to be aware of each other, or even sufficient to be *unaware* of each other, an emotional state is produced



by the conjunction of these two individuals, and the resulting disturbance is hardly likely to be regarded as necessarily an improvement on the state of affairs had they never met at all. (Bion, 1994, p. 321)

Bion is describing the psychoanalytic encounter, but can we not transfer these words to an imagined interaction in the classroom or the lecture theatre? Another interpretation states that we – the educators – have something that we want the student to learn, and we will use any tools at our disposal to make this happen. We will judge our efficacy as educators via the application of what some might suggest are old-fashioned diagnostic tools (the essay, for example, or the National Student Survey). *We will fill you with what we have and what you do not have.* As long ago as the Middle Platonist period of Ancient Greece, however, Plutarch explained that ‘the correct analogy for the mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting — no more — and then it motivates one towards originality and instills the desire for truth’ (Waterfield, 1992, p. 50).

Deborah P. Britzman (2009) builds on Freud’s famous declaration about the impossibility of certain occupations. Freud had written: ‘there are three impossible professions — educating, healing, governing’ (Freud, 1925b/1961, p. 273); and via fascinating comparisons, Britzman is assiduous in proving the great man right and in making the reader think. One of her comparisons is between psychoanalysis and dream work. She writes: ‘the psychoanalyst, along with the analysand, would be caught between not knowing and the desire to know, and by creating a transfer of love into knowledge this conflict begins their strange education. The nature of this education, however, is not easy to convey because it exists and does not exist at the same time’ (Britzman, 2009, p. viii). She also compares education with the dream; she writes:

like the dream, education requires association, interpretation, and a narrative capable of bringing to awareness, for further construction, things that are farther from the mind. And whatever education is dedicated to, all education suffers a radical fate of indeterminacy. The approach that can best turn education inside out, in order to understand something of its emotional situation and its inhibitions, symptoms, and anxieties, is psychoanalysis. (Britzman, 2009, p. viii)

By drawing attention to the similarities between education and dreaming, Britzman invites the reader to consider the roles and responsibilities of both the student *and* the educator. 'In any learning one feels pressure,' she advises (Britzman, 2009, p. ix), 'without knowing from where it comes, to make knowledge certain and so to stabilize the object lest it escape one's efforts.'

There are several interesting tensions between my notion of the central fragility of learning and Britzman's ideas about what education happens to be. 'Education itself will be interminable,' she writes, 'because it is always incomplete and because it animates our own incompleteness' (Britzman, 2009, p. 3). While I agree with the premise that one never finishes learning, my area of interest is the adults who do not feel that the effort associated with such tenacity is worthwhile. *These* are my Fragile Learners, and they might easily be terrified by the proposal that their education has no finishing point. The absence of an ending would be every bit as solid a barrier to learning as an *actual* barrier to learning would be. The absence would assume the status of something physical and unmoveable.

Britzman goes on to describe 'education as experience, as pedagogy, as affect, as uneven development, as intersubjectivity, and as the basis of the transference and the

countertransference’ (Britzman, 2009, p. 3). From the point of view of the Fragile Learner, the description of ‘uneven development’ is apt: there is much in the relationship between student and educator that exists at a primal level, often ignored by our conscious thought processes. Indeed, Freud himself has much to say on the challenges that lie ahead, for both parties. ‘Education,’ he tells us

can be described without more ado as an incitement to the conquest of the pleasure principle, and to its replacement by the reality principle; it seeks, that is, to lend its help to the developmental process which affects the ego. To this end it makes use of an offer of love as a reward from the educators; and it therefore fails if a spoilt child thinks that it possesses that love in any case and cannot lose it whatever happens. (Freud, 1911, p. 224)

There is something about the intertwined notions of *pleasure-seeking* and *pleasure-giving* that both endures and stands as a common factor between adult and child learners. If we are sincere in our ambition to be *good* learners, we will want to elicit the goodwill of our educators. So, if Freud’s statement has something more of an ‘inspirational’ than a ‘scientific’ quality about it these days, it nevertheless remains relevant to adult learners in Higher Education – as indeed it does to children.

## **Methodology and Methods**

Since the summer of 2010, I have worked in the Centre for Learning Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire. At first, working with colleagues across the Faculties, my role

involved the creation of online learning, either on bespoke projects or more directly on the courses that were being delivered. In the latter example, I worked as part of the course team, which is where much of the material included in this submission sprang from. For example, while listening to the resentment (which I suspected masked anxiety) of colleagues who had been forced to re-contextualise their face-to-face provision into online delivery, I was very much an ethnographic researcher, working with the raw data of day-to-day business. In addition, over the years, I have trained many colleagues in the use of various learning technologies; and while working with colleagues, conversations evolved that were instrumental in the formation of some of my early ideas about Fragile Learning. Indeed, much of the work that I hereby present was inspired by projects that I have undertaken as part of my day job. For much of my first five years of employment at the University of Bedfordshire (from 2010 to 2015), I was professionally embedded in the Health and Social Sciences Faculty for at least one day a week, often more, and working with a large group of nurses, some of whom I eventually committed to the record (for example, to produce the interviews in 'The Internet is Unwell').

The exception to the above is 'Prison Language', which I did indeed write and have published during the same time period, but which relied on material from earlier employment at another place of learning (as is described in the paper itself). Therefore, 'Prison Language' was the only paper based on lived experience that occurred *before* my time working at the University of Bedfordshire. Nevertheless, by immersing myself in a brand new language system and trying to learn it (for reasons mentioned in the paper), I had been working with ethnographic principles. I had been a visiting part of the community in question. Furthermore, I refer to the prison in other papers in this submission ( 'The Absence of E' and 'The Internet is Unwell'), with a view to making comparisons.

To state the matter explicitly, I have employed a somewhat mixed methods approach that includes ethnography and occasional elements of case studies. In addition, in the sense that much of what I present led to change within the group in question, there are good reasons to think of my work as action research. However, I have always aligned myself more closely with the ethnographer. Specifically, some papers are 'traditional' ethnography; others use ethnographic data and theorize it; others still employ theoretical reflection on processes and practices that I have been involved in. While the first paper – 'E-learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking' – sets the scene for what is to follow, it was also the intellectual product of a time working with University of Bedfordshire colleagues on a variety of online projects, however conceptual the finished writing might seem. I am conscious of the fact that I have undertaken multiple roles (professional, researcher, educator and learner) during the years that have led to this PhD submission. In addition, I have published several novels and volumes of short fiction – a fact that I mention with respect to my novel, *O My Days* (Mathew, 2015b), much of the material for which I collected while working at the same prison where I collected material for the 'Prison Language' paper. This was not at all problematic for me. I would take my leather-bound notebook into classes where I was teaching, and if I heard something rich and valuable to either project, I would simply jot it down in the book. Some of this dictation – it seemed to me instinctively – had a very apparent place in a work of fiction (a plot was growing), and some of it seemed to fit ideas that I had had about the academic paper that was gaining solidity and shape. Indeed, I am instinctively organised in this way: I am able to file ideas into different sections of a notebook – but also in different sections of my brain. Every now and then, a notion might make the leap from academic writing to fiction, or *vice versa* – but quite often I know what I will write about some time in advance.

The multiplicity of the various roles that I have undertaken, in other words, has been negotiated naturally and organically, with my role as a researcher – and the possibility of there being something relevant to my research – always nearby. In the years between the prison job and my work at the University of Bedfordshire, the leather-bound notebook was lost (its contents, however, had been fully transcribed), but my working practice has always been to write the matter down in a hardback notebook, preferably using a fountain pen, to see how it looks and feels, before committing it to the screen. Regardless of whether I am writing as a social scientist or a novelist, my job is to *tell a convincing story*, using any of the tools of language or construction that I have learned over the years.

The only variation in my data collection methods was when I interviewed colleagues that I had worked with to re-contextualise their face-to-face courses into online learning (to gather information for the mini-case studies in 'The Internet is Unwell'). For these interviews I used a voice recording programme called Audacity on my laptop computer. I then replayed the audio files and transcribed them onto the screen, which is a longer process than transcribing notes in a notebook, but which does have the advantage of being accurate (because one can replay the file, to check). When one is transcribing from a notebook, one has written down gobbets and done one's best to get the tone and style exactly correct; but this is not possible to check afterwards, though I am confident about all of the definitions used herein.

## The Educational Context

For the purposes of this PhD submission, 'Fragile Learning' refers to prison education and Higher Education, but it is my contention that the principles can be transferred onto any part of the lifelong learning journey. (This is a contention that I will explore in a future book.) The reason why I have concentrated, here, on prison education and on online learning in H.E. (specifically *online* learning in H.E.) is that these were the environments in which I worked when I gathered the material for these particular papers.

## Gendered Language

I would like to make a statement on the use of gendered language throughout this submission. In the book *Fragile Learning* (Mathew, 2015), apropos of the 'Prison Language' chapter, I write: 'For reasons none other than my own experience in male prisons, I have referred to the prisoner as he throughout. Similar institutional structures and psychodynamic phenomena are evident in women's prisons, of course, and the pronoun may be classed as a generic' (Mathew, 2015, p. 232). I would like to add to this statement, here and now, in order to cast my net wider and to include the main essay and the previously published papers – and in so doing, to include the wider educational context of Higher Education. Throughout this submission, in order to avoid repeated clumsy constructions such as 's/he' or 'he or she' to connote the possibility of fragility among students or educators of either gender, I have used the masculine pronoun. This decision was made solely for the sake of ease of reading and is not intended to imply that Fragile

Learners might only be men or boys. The Fragile Learner is not determined by gender, and by my use of *he* in this submission, no political point whatsoever is intended.

## **Learning and Fragile Learning**

Before delving into considerations of what comprises Fragile Learning, perhaps we should try to be clear on what *learning* means. The fact that a ‘universally accepted definition of learning does not exist’ (Domjan, 1998, p. 13) should not deter us from this endeavour.

Where David Kolb (1984, p. 38) declares that ‘Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’, Gert J.J. Biesta (2014) argues that learning itself is only one of seven key concepts – the remaining six being creativity, communication, virtuosity, teaching, emancipation and democracy – that are bound together by the importance of taking risks. Arguably, it is what Deborah Britzman calls the ‘very thought of education’ (Britzman, 2009) – its slippery quality, its elastic boundaries – that makes the challenge of imposing guidelines all the more intoxicating.

Perhaps let us compromise on learning being ‘an enduring change in the mechanisms of behaviour involving specific stimuli and/or responses that results from prior experience with similar stimuli and responses’ (Domjan, 1998, p. 13). Furthermore, in the same author’s formulation: ‘Whenever we see evidence of learning, we see the emergence of a change in behaviour – the performance of a new response or the suppression of a response that occurred previously’ (Domjan, 1998, p. 13).

For a moment, let us think of learning as an object – an acquisition metaphor, in Sfard’s terms (Sfard, 1998). Many objects can be broken with greater ease than was



required to make them. If we think of learning as a very basic object – let us imagine a stick – we can see how it can be broken and how difficult it might be to repair. The act of repairing it would require an additional tool (for example, glue). Now, let us make the object more complex. It would take a good deal of deliberate violent effort to break a *walking* stick – to break something that is meant to support – but it can be done. However, if the object with which we compare education is more complex still – an engine, for example – then we might imagine a *variety* of opportunities for sabotage or damage. The more complicated and intricately structured the object happens to be, the more chances that exist for something to go wrong. One important difference between a stick and an engine is that it takes an expert – more than someone with glue – to fix an engine or to fix broken learning.

Let us return to the interpersonal relational aspects of pedagogic development. In a Widening Participation setting, Fragile Learning might occur as the result of learners not receiving the respect that their individual societies had convinced them was their due. Or it might be the result of age discrepancies: such learners might not be anxious specifically *because* of their age, but advanced years nibble at the fragile walls of their psychic apparatuses. Fragile Learners might experience anxieties that are internal and complex, which can appear (via psychoanalytic projection) to be attacks from other people. In this example, anxiety creates an internal threat which presents itself as a threat from the outside. Alternatively, Fragile Learning might be a consequence of learners having suffered illness or trauma.

Indirectly, some of the ideas behind Fragile Learning have been investigated by other writers. When Meyer and Land submit that ‘teaching is a complex and often challenging process, because learning is a complex and challenging process’ (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. xiv), they are not so much stating the obvious as drawing our attention to a central

conundrum. The conundrum involves the unpredictability of the two or more people in the pedagogic transaction. The same authors continue:

When knowledge ceases to be troublesome, when students sail through the years of a degree programme without encountering challenge or experiencing conceptual difficulty, then it is likely that something valuable will have been lost. If knowledge is to have a transformative effect it probably should be troublesome, or at least troubling, but that does not mean it should be stressful or should provoke the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration that can lead students to give up. (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. xiv)

I would like to include the *educators* who must incorporate and contain both ‘the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration that can lead students to give up’ and the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration with which they themselves are faced. Meyer and Land (2006, pp. xiv-xv) also refer to the fact that students ‘get stuck’ in their learning – ‘at particular points in the curriculum whilst others grasp concepts with comparative ease’ – and ask what teachers can do ‘in relation to the design and teaching of their courses that might help students overcome such barriers to their learning’. It is possible to infer that this is also a predicament that could happen to the educator. *Getting stuck* suggests (at the very least) an original commitment to engaging with learning. If I say that it makes me think of sinking in educational quicksand, then I accept that more is said about me (and my psychoanalytic projections) than about learning; but surely this is part of the point. If I am stuck, I have probably started something; however, I have become mired. The educator

might 'get stuck' in both the *process* of learning (which in turn might halt professional development and snuff out creativity) and also in the reciprocal give-and-take of the pedagogic dynamic.

Not many educators would dispute the importance of embracing the 'troublesomeness' at the heart of education. It is at the junctions of beliefs and certainties – the clashes, the conflicts – where much of the good material is forged. As educators, we should *want* our students to embrace troublesomeness: by asking our students to embrace it, and by taking part in a symbiotic relationship with these students, we are enabled and obliged to embrace it ourselves. Thus, the relationship is enriched and augmented. An 'emotional storm' (Bion, 1979, p. 321) brews, during which the educator acts as a lightning rod, silently and unconsciously absorbing the student's unconscious projections, and during which both parties take themselves (and, unconsciously, *are taken*) to the precarious brink that exists, just before fragility opens up a fissure in front of them.

Katheryn Ecclestone uses the word *fragile* but in a different way and with a different focus from how it is used in my own formulation. Ecclestone's (2008) view and that of Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) is that a 'fragile' learner is one 'at risk' or 'vulnerable': however, she is describing a learner *whose condition of susceptibility has already been discerned*. Ecclestone (2008) complains that

a new language of labelling is appearing throughout the education system from early years to universities. It is becoming commonplace to refer to 'vulnerable learners', 'at risk learners', students with 'fragile identities', 'the disaffected and disengaged', 'the hard to reach', people with 'fractured and fragmented lives', learners with 'complex needs' and 'low self-esteemers'. (Ecclestone, 2008)

In other words, the learner might exhibit traits or characteristics that would make him seem unlikely to be a high achiever... but only if he is judged from the standpoint of what we think of as a 'traditional student'. The author continues:

'Low self-esteem' is widely seen as the cause of social and educational difficulties while whole groups such as asylum seekers learning English, the children of asylum seekers, working class boys or 14-year-olds disaffected with school education, are deemed to 'suffer from low self-esteem' or to be 'emotionally fragile'... The idea that more and more people are emotionally fragile now pervades all areas of life. (Ecclestone, 2008)

It is important to add that Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) couch any notions of fragility inside what they see as a political development: the rise of a 'therapeutic culture' that has spread through the universities of a growing number of countries. According to the authors, this therapeutic (or therapy) culture – in which the emotional skills *associated with* learning are more important than any content or subject matter that is used to *deliver* learning – is at least partly responsible for the evolution of a generation of hard-done-by students and unfortunate educators. Institutions assume that students and staff are emotionally at risk, the authors contend. Furthermore, this therapeutic culture leads to an educational environment in which students are infantilised and feel obliged to seek more support than they might actually require. Educators in this same environment might be terrified of making decisions; or might regard emotional outbursts as expressions more valuable than

the articulation of pedagogic or strategic ideas. Fundamentally, the ‘dangerous rise of therapeutic education’ is nothing less serious than the damaging of human potential.

Our definitions undoubtedly share certain nuances, but *my* Fragile Learner is an individual whose shortcomings are not so easy to predict (or try to mollify). *My* Fragile Learner is not representative of a ‘type’ or of a ‘group’; nor am I describing any facet of ‘therapeutic education’, as Ecclestone and Hayes would deem it. For me, the Fragile Learner cannot blame the process of infantilisation (for example), because for *my* Fragile Learner this *milieu* is not a recognisable environment – or phenomenon. Indeed, as I see it, the Fragile Learner might have in-built strategies for self-defeat that are not only invisible or indiscernible to his educator or his peers, but are also hidden *by and from himself*. If it is true that ‘education begins with the anxiety of dependency, helplessness, and fears of separation’ (Britzman, 2009, p. 7), then the true wonder might not be that some learners are fragile, but that any learner is anything *but* fragile! With respect to Elizabeth Chapman Hoult and her exemplary work on student resilience (Hoult, 2009), my own focus is less on what helps our learners and educators endure and persevere, than on what *disrupts* their learning. Or to put it another way, where Hoult focuses on strategies employed by adult learners to keep them *in* education, my own focus is on the reasons why learners struggle.

Jacques Lacan asks: ‘What is it to teach, when what is to be taught has precisely to be taught not only to one who doesn’t know, but to one who *can’t* know?’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 17). Here we see the concept of pedagogic insecurity at its most depressing and most exciting. It encapsulates one essence of Fragile Learning: its jittery, anxiety-building *unknowability*. If it is impossible for a student to ‘know’, then the practice of teaching is as precarious as that of learning. Comparing teaching with analytic supervision, Lacan adds that the experience is ‘where you bring along what you might know and where I would only enter the fray to

impart the analogue of interpretation, namely, that addition by means of which something appears, which gives some meaning to what you believe you know and makes that which it's possible to grasp beyond the limits of knowledge appear in a flash' (Lacan, 2014, p. 17).

This brings me to the subject of anxiety.

### **What is Anxiety?**

For the purposes of this submission, anxiety is to be considered as a psychoanalytic function, by its psychoanalytic definition, and by its place in a psychoanalytic construct. In particular, I am keen to dispel the myth that 'anxiety' is a handy synonym for 'fear' or 'stress'.<sup>1</sup> Charles Rycroft argues that 'anxiety is not, properly speaking, a form of fear... but of vigilance; vigilance being that state of subliminal alertness with which we continuously scan our environment to ensure that we notice significant changes within it and can adapt to them by appropriate action' (Rycroft, 1979, p. 103). Rycroft notes that 'fear is the emotion evoked by the appearance within our environment of something known to be threatening and dangerous, while anxiety is the emotion evoked by the appearance within it of something unfamiliar and strange, something which seems to demand a response but to which we do not yet know what the response should be' (*ibid.* p. 104).

The following – again, by Rycroft – is as good an unwitting description of Fragile Learning as any I have encountered. When the author writes that 'intellectual activity seeks to master the unknown by understanding it but itself generates further uncertainty and anxiety by revealing unexpected pockets of uncertainty and ignorance in what was thought

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<sup>1</sup> Nor does my work refer to anxiety *disorders*. At no point will I be referring to such explicitly clinical material.

to be already understood' (Rycroft, 1979, p. 105), he might have been describing contemporary learners in Higher Education – or their educators!

If anxiety is an emotion, can it also be a tool? Certainly this is a contention that I put forward in 'E-learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking', 'From Fatigue to Anxiety', and elsewhere. As I mention in 'The Internet is Unwell', Freud (1926) gives us an early full-length explication of anxiety, which is often cited to this day. 'If a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child,' he writes (1926, p. 87), 'it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension.'

While it is not true to say that psychoanalysis and anxiety are inextricably linked (both can exist without the other), there are notable overlaps. Copjec (2006, p. 104) informs us that: 'Anxiety is not only the feeling of suffocation that accompanies the encounter with being, but the felt need to escape it... Anxiety restrains the hand of the writer, preventing her from composing her thoughts...' Whereas, seemingly proud that he can offer his learners a *period* of anxiety, Lacan contextualises the subject with reference to his own work: 'Anxiety is very precisely the meeting point where everything from my previous disquisition is lying in wait for you' (Lacan, 2014, p. 3).

Introducing Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Lacan adds: 'When we do go into this text, you shall see very well what there is to be seen as regards anxiety, namely, that there isn't any safety net. When anxiety is at issue, each piece of the mesh, so to speak, only carries any meaning in so far as it leaves empty the space where anxiety lies' (Lacan, 2014, p. 9). Lacan states that anxiety is directly related to the presence of the Other. 'In analysis, there is something that stands prior to everything we can elaborate or understand. I shall call this the presence of the Other... The Other is there. It's on this path and with the

same intention that we meet the indication I've already given you concerning something that goes much farther still, namely, anxiety' (Lacan, 2014, p. 22).

Psychoanalysis is a matter of reframing – seeing the familiar in a new way, from a new angle – and so is education. It might be that we reframe an area of absence (in our understanding, for instance). Such reframings will share anxiety as a contributory factor – the anxiety that has no specific cause, but which might be resolved, in hindsight, as having been associated with a fear of solitude, a fear of misunderstanding, a fear of ridicule or self-ridicule, a fear of completion or of not being able to complete. Reframing might also occur as the result of co-creating the problem (or task) in pedagogic interactions. For example, the educator sets a task, but it might be the educator and the Fragile Learner who reframe the problem and thereby co-create a methodology by which to solve it. Apart from the original setting of the task, each of the following steps might be pregnant with anxieties, because neither party knows what will follow.

Siân Bayne's work on online identities is pertinent here. During the process of co-creating a task, anxiety might derive from 'the fear of *loss of control* through the modes in which identities are expressed online' and the interesting concept of 'self-betrayal' (Bayne, 2005, p. 31). In the sense that both of these concerns are theoretical concepts, we might say that anxiety is their driver. Anxiety is an awareness of discomfort relating to something that one cannot identify, and both a loss of control and self-betrayal pertain to *absence*, to a removal from what had been the whole. This is true even if the control had never been truly in place to begin with: the Fragile Learner had *assumed himself* to be in control. The Fragile Learner is afraid of what has *not* happened – and of what *cannot* be imagined. Alternatively, as I opine in 'The Internet is Unwell...', the source of anxiety might be divided between a



fear of *personally* being seen and a fear of *not* being seen, in the sense of wanting to remain hidden (cf. 'Reasons to be Fragile').

Far from being something to be avoided, anxiety is impossible to steer away from; arguably, it is at the root of all learning and can be employed strategically as part of the learning process. We can use the imagined presence of anxiety – what we believe will be present in our learners because it happens to be present within us – and make the education that we co-create both troublesome and conflictual. During the pedagogic interaction, both parties must expect to be destroyed and then recreated.

### **My Writing/My Learning**

If one of the aims of education is to create the learner's grappling with complex and difficult ideas, then it is something that is shared with the process of writing. In the latter, the aim is to encourage readers to be enticed into reading one more chapter, and to 'dream'. For Bion, to 'dream' a text was to interpret it (Grotstein, 2007, p. 7) and by re-reading my own published papers, I am in the position of re-evaluating them and of dreaming them.

To re-examine the papers in this submission I use a method suggested by Freud as the best strategy for a psychoanalyst to gain access to the mind of a patient. It was Freud's belief (Freud, 1911-1915) that the psychoanalyst should pay attention to nothing in particular; he should make no early judgement about what he considers significant, because to do so is to distract oneself from what *becomes* significant. On this subject Bion agreed with Freud. Bion (1970) advised the psychoanalyst's eschewing of both memory and desire: he should neither remember what has previously occurred with the patient nor hope for anything to evolve in the analysis.

With my mind as empty of experience and shadows as I can make it, I regard the essays that complement this submission. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, all page references are to the papers' appearances in *Fragile Learning* (Mathew, 2015).

### **Discussion: Published Paper 1: E-Learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking**

'E-Learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking' was published in *E-learning and Digital Media* in 2014. I chose this journal because it is highly influential and also more 'edgy' than most learning technology journals. It accepts non-empirical pieces (unlike many journals that publish work on technology-enhanced learning), and is more open to a range of theoretical perspectives. In my work I am interested in the (sometimes unhappy) marriage between learning and psychoanalysis, and how to 'justify' this kind of atypical research to editors and reviewers can sometimes be an impediment to publication.

By the time this paper was published in 2014, I had published several papers that addressed the intersubjective domains of interest between learning and psychoanalysis. As we will see later in this submission, the papers that preceded this one used case studies and an element of action research in order to reach their conclusions. This current paper, on the other hand, did not. As I state in the abstract, this paper 'argues that time and its associated philosophical puzzles impinge on both psychoanalytic theory and on e-learning at two specific points.' The paper continues:

The first is in the distinction between unconscious mental activity and conscious thinking. In psychoanalysis we would talk of the distinction between primary and secondary processes, and here the paper notes the learner's disregarding of the

category of time in the former, and the learner's cognizance of it in the latter, exploring some of the characteristics of both of these processes. The learner's sense of time is a result of experiencing delay between desire and satisfaction. Here, the wish-fulfilling propensities of the primary processes deny time, whereas the adaptive propensities of the secondary processes lead to its discovery. The second specific point of interest is a viewing of Freud's theory of memory from a contemporary pedagogic standpoint. Freud's theory of memory assumes that all past experiences are represented in the present and are capable of manifesting an effect on the present. (Mathew, 2015, p. 167)

It will not seem surprising that the collision between the 'old' and the 'new' was deliberately provocative. It interested me to return to psychoanalytic basics: for example, to the Freudian notion of *cathexis* – in a paper that dealt with technology and generalisations about the pioneering work that we used to call e-learning. However, what comes to light on re-examining this paper is that this was not the only collision. Not only was I bringing together unconscious processes that have existed long before Freud chose to discuss them, with contemporary applications of technology; I was hanging online learning on a psychoanalytic framework but also *hanging psychoanalysis on an online learning framework*. I was using one to help illustrate the other, and in doing so was creating a third.

With respect to Thomas Ogden, who coined the term *the analytic third* (Ogden, 1994), I would like to suggest the phrase *the Pedagogic Third*. Ogden states that 'one can no longer simply speak of the analyst and the analysand as separate subjects who take one another as objects. The idea of the analyst as a neutral blank screen for the patient's projections is occupying a position of steadily diminishing importance in current conceptions of the

analytic process' (Ogden, 1994, p. 62). I submit that a similar relationship and phenomenon exists in the pedagogic transaction. As I suggest in the paper under discussion, this Pedagogic Third is created thus:

Both online learning and psychoanalysis rely directly on the interdependence of (at least) two stakeholder parties. Both benefit from introspection and reflection on one's previous goals, targets, achievements, and failures. Both lead the stakeholders on a journey whose map can only be glanced at when the journey begins. And both are educational—possibly therapeutic—experiences that use the concept of time productively: as a tool, as a restriction, as a source of (necessary) conflict... (Mathew, 2015, p. 167)

In addition to exploring factors that lead to Fragile Learning – time, memory, entropy and anxiety – I acknowledge a further point. Although it might be true that the educator and the Fragile Learner co-create the Pedagogic Third, it might also be true that the educator and the learner (who is not yet fragile or otherwise) *co-create the Fragile Learner*.

### **Discussion: Published Paper 2: Prison Language**

'Prison language: A psychoanalytic approach to the language of British young offenders in the twenty-first century' was published in the *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Volume 22, Issue 2, 2013. This was a very important acceptance for me. This journal is a worldwide leading publication of psychoanalytic writing.

To re-examine this particular paper is to re-examine a period of my life. The memories of writing – and indeed, the contents themselves – are tightly knotted with strands of my life experience. So much so that even now, nine years since I left my job at Aylesbury Young Offenders Institution in 2007, I sometimes dream of the place during spells of personal or professional challenge. Aylesbury YOI is the both cathexis *for* and the tenacious source *of* my anxiety dreams. At Aylesbury YOI it was my job to educate young men between eighteen and twenty-one years of age, in a maximum security setting.

After a while, my presence and my role seemed pointless: as I note in the paper, ‘I mean nothing to these men other than as an imposition’ (Mathew, 2015, p. 14). Because my job necessitated the movement of offenders from one part of the prison to the Education Block, *I* was part of the problem; *I* asserted and reconfirmed my own nuisance value. In essence, simultaneously, I personified an educator and a barrier to learning, in the sense that my ‘insistence’ on the young men’s presence in Education was the very thing that made some of them rebel against it. When I informed the offender that he had a class to attend, I was enforcing group formation with people who might have had good reasons *not* to share physical space. On an hourly basis I was met with offenders/students who did not know whether or not to hate me; somehow this indecision and fragility (on their part) was more anxiety-inducing than something more (violently) definite might have been.

I was very much the Fragile Learner, beset by doubts and a Bionian ‘nameless dread’ (Bion, 1967) that (again) was somehow worse than the omnipresent threat of physical threat. And yet it seems obvious to me only now that the air of anxiety was not solely of my making, nor endured by me alone. It was shared – we *all* felt it. Anxiety drove us all; and made Fragile Learners of us all.

While I stated above that my conception of the Fragile Learner was not dependent on pre-conceived notions about what should or should not constitute a 'vulnerable' or 'hard to reach' student, there is little advantage in denying a few home truths. With very few exceptions, the offenders with whom I worked had been inadequately schooled. Many of them were without a father figure. Many of them came from impoverished backgrounds. Many of them had found an identity and a job to carry out while involved in a gang. And many of them had short attention spans.

Identity is vital here. By entering the prison system, 'the adolescent has been dragged into a new world and a horrifying mode of existence, his only anchor to the previous world being a memory of a regretted misdemeanour and the accompanying trials of an active superego' (Mathew, 2015, p. 21). He has also entered a system of control, in which it was not me (the educator) who wished to control – but that is the way it would have looked. The barriers to learning, therefore, were perceived as external – from without, someone else's fault, as in: *it's the fault of the system of which the educator is at least conceptually a part*. It did not help, of course, that in a prison, barriers to learning are evident from the start of every working day, even down to a semantic level. For a start, there is the walk to the Education Block (the Education *Block*). We accept that the word *block* has different meanings, but it can also mean *impediment* or *barrier*. The very place where learning *should* have taken place was known as the place where learning could *not* take place!

This brings us to the topic the paper itself: the topic of language. Previously in this submission we discussed the intersubjective work that takes place in the formation of the Pedagogic Third. Here in the prison the synergies were more complex. In addition to the periods of boredom and physical and mental danger that I encountered, I stepped into a parallel world that was created via the vigorous rules of a language that was not available

outside the prison's walls. Structurally, the language was fascinating, but it drew me in for other reasons, not least of which was its function as a container for learner anxiety and a defence mechanism. The 'Prison Language' paper and a published novel entitled *O My Days* (Mathew, 2015b) were influenced by my immersion in the offenders' language, which I learned in secret. Both paper and novel discuss fragility in the learning process.

The 'Prison Language' paper makes a contribution to the advancement of my field of study. While publications that concentrate on prison slang are easy to find (see Mulvey, 2010), they tend to be web-based, non-academic publications, and they also tend to favour U.S. environments. To the best of my knowledge, my 'Prison Language' paper is the first paper to address the issue of an invented language in an English institution for offenders, with a view to doing more than being a simple glossary. Not only does 'Prison Language' give examples of the language in question, it discusses how the language was used. For many young men, it was a social adhesive, designed to keep me, other staff – and crucially, other prisoners who had committed a crime that was seen as unpalatable – at arm's length. Speaking the language was a passport into an area of likeminded acceptance; but many of the young men in question would have balked at the notion that what they were doing was containing anxiety. In hindsight, I must have been aware of how language was used to mask an all-but ubiquitous terror of pedagogic failure.

Although my time working in the prison was not the first time that I had encountered Fragile Learning, it was probably the first time that I had encountered Fragile Learning as an *entire student body's default setting*. In other words, I was trying to teach 'boys' who did not want to learn while I was trying to learn the language that they did not want to teach me!

### Discussion: Published Paper 3: The Absence of E

‘The Absence of ‘E’: The Role of the Internet in Two Distance Learning Programmes’ was published in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Volume 16 Number 4, in December 2011. I also presented it the IADIS International Conference on e-Learning, in Rome, Italy, in July of the same year. I feel that this paper remains important as the starting point of the five-year publishing and intellectual journey that has followed it.

‘The Absence of E’ compares two education programmes on which I had been active, one of which had had no Internet access for the learners (a course delivered at the prison) and one of which had had *only* Internet access (a Master’s-level distance learning course in Public Health, with students in different parts of the world). The groups could not have been much more different, and the paper was not submitted with any claims to scientific enquiry, more an educator’s view of how learner anxiety was contained.

In my opinion, this paper remains relevant: to this day there exists a certain tension between online and face-to-face pedagogic models (cf. ‘The Internet is Unwell...’ and ‘From Fatigue to Anxiety?’). Despite their relevance, both ‘The Absence of ‘E’’ and ‘From Fatigue to Anxiety?’ demonstrate – or at least imply – a certain nostalgia. Elsewhere I have written of nostalgia: ‘Regret for paths not taken and for the choices that were voted against often takes the form of romantic wistfulness’ (Mathew, 2016); and if it is true that we look back on the early days of online learning in such a way, it is probably because we acknowledge a degree of disappointment. E-learning had burnish and sparkle and promise aplenty... but in retrospect it seems clear that it had no *plan*. It was offered (variously) as an alternative or as a complement to more traditional face-to-face deliveries, but beyond the element of a learner’s freedom to study at convenient times, the benefits turned out to be limited.



In 'The Absence of 'E'' and also threaded through my whole submission is a question about the implications for educators in a Web 2.0 existence. For example, early in 'From Fatigue to Anxiety?' I write:

Despite the fact that our burgeoning field is more fruitful than ever, and despite the fact that many of our occupations did not exist a decade ago, we are realistic, even cautious, about expansion. Why do we not Think Big? Quite possibly any sense of self-restraint (posing as pragmatism) is a conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of our current restrictions. We tend to predict the future of HE based on a shared Web 1 mentality, and err somewhat on the side of caution – for fear of appearing foolish or naive. Furthermore, the unknown can seem scary; and this is also a direct result of educator anxiety. (Mathew, 2015, p. 136)

I find the notion of Internet fatigue (with its implications, needless to say, on student fatigue, educator fatigue and Fragile Learning) very interesting; and I address it in Published Paper 4, next. But for now, perhaps we might pause to wonder why online learning failed to achieve its full potential. If we look at the early days of e-learning with nostalgia, we are at least in acceptance of the fact that online learning did not raise the bar as high as some people had expected (see Bryant, 2013). Perhaps our involvement with online learning was always more pragmatic than we acknowledged it to be at the time: *pragmatic*, rather than having been driven by a genuine passion for the digital world. We might also add the following questions. Did people really know what was expected of them? Did people really *want* to know what to do, or did they prefer to complain about not knowing what to do?

In 'The Absence of 'E'' I argue that the learners studying in prison suffered no deficiency in their education as a result of not having access to the Internet. In fact, the opposite was the case. The learners in my class were able to meet once a week and take part in group learning. The educators who would mark their work (Open University tutors, for example) were miles away from the prison itself, unaware of the seething tensions that were concentrated on the Education Block. *Their* role was fairly straightforward. *Mine* was not. Fulfilling as I did the intermingled tasks of being these offenders' educator, factotum and anxiety-container, I was responsible for knowing a little bit about a wide range of educational subjects. The absence of the Internet affected *me* – it did not affect the learners. By contrast, the other programme – entirely online – necessitated almost an additional set of jobs for the educator, not least of these being that of counsellor.

#### **Discussion: Published Paper 4: From Fatigue to Anxiety**

'From Fatigue to Anxiety? Implications for educational design in a Web 2.0 world' was published in *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, Volume 9 Number 2 in 2011. I also presented it at the IADIS International Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. My interest in submitting to this particular journal stemmed partly from its famously stringent entry requirements and also from what I perceived to be a good match in terms of the content of my paper and the journal's tendency to emphasise the human being in its discussions of pedagogic technologies.

When I wrote this paper, online learning was enjoying something of a growth spurt. In the five years since this was published, an undeniable reduction of excitement has taken place. But while the mode of delivery remained fresh, it was of course nerve-wracking for

the educators involved. It is here, in essence, in all but in name, that I introduce the concept of *educators* as Fragile Learners: it is the educators who have been asked to re-contextualise their face-to-face courses into vibrant examples of e-learning.

The question mark in my title is pertinent. In Higher Education, the move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 *did* constitute a shift from a certain ground-down weariness among our colleagues and students to the sort of anxiety that seems to have no subject or reason. Our colleagues were aware of being forced into online environments into which they did not wish to venture, but the anxiety was of a greater wrongdoing that lay in wait for them than simply forgetting which button to push next.

It is interesting to note that we seem to have gone back to fatigue once again. A mere five years after the paper was composed, and Web 2.0 is no longer difficult or new for most parties. Not only learners but (crucially) we educators too are more comfortable than ever in the online *milieu*. In a paper only five years old I am advocating the use of a tool – the Internet – that most people already take for granted. Indeed, my paper would seem to reflect a mode of existence that already seems antediluvian in some respects. And while I smile wryly at my reference to ‘our burgeoning field’ and my description of it as ‘more fruitful than ever’ (and the fact that ‘Mode 3’ learning never really took root, or was even consistently defined), I also reflect that I had written that ‘we tend to predict based on a Web 1 mentality’ (Mathew, 2015, p. 136). My re-examination of the paper prompts me to consider a hypothetical Web 3.0 and wonder what the next stage of our technological revolution will have on the ways we teach and learn.

**Discussions: Published Paper 5 (Cyber Tools and Virtual Weapons) & Published Paper 6 (Conflict in Online Learning)**

‘Cyber Tools and Virtual Weapons: Social Media in Politics’ found a home in *Social Media in Politics: Case Studies on the Political Power of Social Media* (Springer) in 2014. ‘Conflict in Online Learning’ was published in 2014 in a book by Springer entitled *Global Innovation of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Both of these publications are the results of their editors inviting me to submit a piece of work.

From the way that I have joined these two papers together, the reader might infer (correctly) that they share concepts. The subject matter of violence is implicit in the words *Weapons* and *Conflict* in the titles. Via the turbulence at play in any transaction, the educator and the learner will sometimes create a third identity. This identity is likely to be both troubled and troublesome; it is this identity that the process then frames for both parties to admire and despise. As Bayne addresses the matter: ‘Online environments may create a space where the narratives of the self maintained face to face are more readily disrupted, but there is nothing deterministic about this’ (Bayne, 2005, p. 38). This Pedagogic Third is not necessarily a Fragile Learner, but he might be; and he might be a student and he might be the educator; or he might be what the two identities have (unconsciously) conspired to create among themselves.

These papers endorse the creative potential of aggression (for a reference to the Bionian ‘meeting of minds’, please see above). By smashing together realities, by colliding identities and approaches, we do of course risk breaking bonds – but this is what Fragile Learning is partly about. Yes, the learning *might* shatter; in the aftermath it *might* be impossible to recreate anything that looks the same as the component parts once did; but in

the anxious foretelling of anxiety, there exists a space that I have called Fragile Learning, in which the rich material might take root, absorb sustenance from the anxieties of the learner, the educator or the Pedagogic Third, and grow.

### **Discussion: Published Paper 7: The Internet is Unwell**

‘The Internet is Unwell...and Will Not Be at School Today: Oppositions, Omissions and Online Anxiety’ was commissioned by the editors of *Insight Journal* and published in 2014. Not only did it collect all of my thinking on the subjects of learner and educator anxiety and Fragile Learning, it also felt like my last words on these topics. It was a joy to compose this paper – and to complete my cycle of thinking for the time being. I regard this paper as the best of those I have included.

Not only did I return to online learning, I also returned to Aylesbury Young Offenders Institution. Although I had published several papers and a novel (Mathew, 2015b), it seemed that the atmosphere of foundry-hard pessimistic gloom was never far from my consciousness and could be summoned at will. While contemplating ‘The Internet is Unwell...’ — both as the last chapter of my *Fragile Learning* book (Mathew, 2015) and as the last paper for this PhD submission — it was back to the prison I travelled. The journey was easy. The destination was as complex as ever: the years that had passed might have made the revisit slightly more palatable, but on an unconscious level it was clear that much work remained to be done.

With many universities offering options to study online, I question whether we assume too much about learners’ and educators’ comfort in the online environment. For example, in the course of researching my work, I discovered anxiety among colleagues who

had been asked to work in this way for the first time. In 'The Internet is Unwell...', using transcripts of short interviews with three anxious colleagues, my aim was to show how debilitating an enforced teaching role on the Internet can be, and we apply to the learning process the work of Carl Rogers, Lacan and John Steiner. As I say in the Introduction:

We discover that Rogers had discussed the Fragile Learner as long ago as the middle of the previous century, in all but name; and by employing a tapestry of anecdotes and memories, the former of which are accurate and the latter of which are subject to the customary erosion caused by time, self-protection and chronic narcissism, the chapter refers to a learner's shame and humiliation in online learning. (Mathew, 2015, p. 204)

Having defined my concept of Fragile Learning, I also discuss barriers to adult learning, and explore the situation that arises when the educator also becomes a Fragile Learner. I would like to hope that this project-summative paper would otherwise speak for itself.

### **Reasons to be Fragile**

If something can be created, it can be destroyed; however, it cannot be *uncreated*, which suggests a disappearance of that which had been created, or at the very least, a reduction back down to the original ingredients. Even when something breaks, there is a good chance that we can see what it had been in its complete but fragile state.

Certain reasons for Fragile Learning are external, and considered to be not of Fragile Learners' own making. They are impediments that have been put in the way of their

education, either with malice aforethought or in ignorance or error. *Some* of these obstacles, however, are localised and internal. They are created in the Fragile Learner's mind; they are of his own creation, though often they are not recognised as such, and the learner might blame other people or other situations for the failure to learn. Full-time students who have jobs (for example) might blame the difficulties that they have with their studies on an overbearing educator, a lazy or absent educator, on a lack of direction or on *too much* direction. And the same could be said of students with childcare responsibilities – or students who return to their families for the purpose of studying, and the complex dynamics that this introduces. As Ecclestone notes:

other factors in their lives such as family support, or work circumstances, as well as their own beliefs and feelings about learning, play a proportionately greater role for better or worse... Sometimes these factors combine with the teacher's efforts and make a significant difference. At other times they undermine teachers' and students' efforts to improve learning, by questioning confidence or preventing students from attending the class regularly. (Ecclestone, 2010, p. 152)

While we are discussing the subject of learners and home-life complications, Thomas and Quinn are also instructive, particularly on the issue of first generation entry into the university system. 'Parental education affects attitudes towards HE,' they write (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 98). Furthermore, the experiences of one's parents' education might influence 'the process of deciding to apply and enter higher education, transition, learning and teaching, social engagement and integration, and the decision to leave higher education' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 98). And on the topic of the breaking point, when

the pedagogic adventure has proved too much and the learner has decided to move on, the same authors note that:

students did not identify a single factor that prompted them to leave, but rather it was the combination of circumstances and the lack of alternative options that were open to them. Many of these students felt that they had to decide to stay or leave, rather than to negotiate a change in their situation... students left (and sometimes applied to re-enter) HE, rather than switching to a part-time mode of study, changing their programme of study, taking a semester out for extenuating circumstances or transferring to another institution. (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 99)

It will not seem odd to surmise that the origins of a certain predilection towards fragility might lie in childhood. Let us take the example of Hannah (in Reay & William, 1999). Hannah is an eleven year-old schoolchild, worried about tests because of her difficulties with spelling and the times tables: she is worried that she will be reduced to 'a nothing' by examination. Although my conception of Fragile Learning would veer away from 'types' as such, we might nonetheless ask if there is any kind of typicality to Hannah's experience.

Now, let us compound matters by providing the adult Hannah with an educator who means well but is not in control of his material. John Hattie tells us that 'Students who are taught by expert teachers exhibit an understanding of the concepts targeted in the instruction that is more coherent and at a higher level of abstraction than the understanding achieved by students in classes taught by experienced, but not expert, teachers' (Hattie, 2012, p. 30). Gordon Stobart would seem to concur: 'Expert learning needs expert teachers,



and to become expert teachers we need to be expert learners ourselves... As in other professions, teaching expertise is the product of using experience to develop powerful frameworks in which to make sense of both familiar and unfamiliar information' (Stobart, 2014, p. 14). Or alternatively, our Fragile Learner might meet the situation that Martin Stanton describes, which could be viewed as depressing! Stanton writes:

Education is one of those bad jokes that never seem to end. Few seem to have the courage to get up and leave. It retrenches its ground annually. Abandons its claims to produce enlightened human beings and opts instead for administrators and technocrats. Those trained for special social roles rather than general chores like life. Each layer in the educational hierarchy then evolves a unique reactionary style of administering through its own specific difficulties. (Stanton, 1983, p. 85)

If the subject is specifically *online* Fragile Learning, then it is possible that the problem is not only the gargantuan scale of what a user perceives when contemplating the Internet; the problem is his own tiny contribution to an entity so vast (cf. 'The Internet is Unwell...'). Or let us think about the Fragile Learner who is missing some crucial tools. For example, what if the ability to *reflect* has never been developed? As lifewide learners will agree, reflection provides an opportunity to make sense of an experience, and it can indicate how to handle a similar situation more appropriately another time. But what if the learner does not possess the *skills*? Boud *et al* (1985) defined three key stages of reflection in learning: first the need to return to the experience, then to consider one's feeling using an audit of positive and obstructive elements, then the re-evaluation of the experiences in order to find

association, integration, and appropriation. If the Fragile Learner is without the skills to undertake any one of these steps, reflection becomes all-but a meaningless term.

Similar debates might be entered into with respect to any of the following factors in Fragile Learning: the speed of teaching and learning; the uncertainty, the risks; the balances and equities; the ambiguities and identities; and the orders and authorities of Higher Education. Poor communication skills are bad for the learner (inevitably); but ironically (perhaps) an educator's poor communication skills also lead to a poor experience for the *educator* as well. Learning involves high expectations and clear goals; it needs motivation and strong mental frameworks – for every one of the parties involved and not only the student. Where Meyer and Land (2006, p.22) suggest that learning involves the occupation of a liminal space during the process of mastery of a threshold concept, I submit that this is true for both the student *and* the educator.

It becomes a matter of trust. Teaching *is* a form of trust, after all: trust in oneself; also trust in the unconscious, which is perhaps the biggest daredevil leap of all. What I do when I begin a teaching session is alert the back of my head that there will be work to do in the future; that it is time to start forging links in the chain, but to keep it quiet for the moment. Furthermore (as an educator), I am aware that the student unconsciously might be considering any of the following questions. Is a good educator teaching me? Is a good educator teaching me how to think? Is a good educator teaching me that I do not think enough? Is a good educator teaching me that I do not think *well* enough? Or is my educator a bad educator? Or am I a bad student?

This is an example of the psychoanalytic concept of splitting. Splitting creates instability in relationships because one person can be viewed as either personified virtue or personified vice at different times, depending on whether they gratify the subject's needs or

frustrate them. It is a common defence mechanism that invites the subject to believe that an individual's motivations and actions are *entirely bad* or *entirely good*: there is neither concession nor compromise for middle ground.

Is the question, then, one of knowing when to compromise? Should we attempt to find a space in the middle? The permutations for what comprises Fragile Learning are infinite. Some of our learners are *obliged* to study, either under the cosh of parental or peer pressure—or are engaged on a programme of learning at the behest of the organisation for which they work. Such learners, of course, might be fragile: they might not *want* the space in their intellectual apparatus so comprehensively filled—and in this circumstance, they might seek out a reason not to be 'bullied' by the pedagogy with which we as educators seek to impregnate them (cf. 'The Internet is unwell').

## Conclusion

This PhD submission is about barriers to learning. Reber defines *barrier* as: 'Any impediment or block preventing an organism from reaching its goal. Although the barrier is often physical it is not improper to refer to barriers which result from an individual's emotional or mental limitations or, more metaphorically, those which are of purely psychological origins' (Reber, 1985, p. 82). These words, I feel, sum up my formulation of the Fragile Learner.

If anxiety is an important part of the education process, what would the opposite situation look like? Perhaps the opposite would consist of learners entirely free of anxiety. Paradoxically, this would seem to suggest Fragile Learning as well: the possibility for drop-out and failure is surely high. One factor that helps to create learning is the risk of failure. It

is in the spaces between complacency and terror – these spaces marked by a psychoanalytically-defined object-free anxiety – that the richer, deeper learning can be said to take place.

There is a type of learner (and educator) who embraces the comfortable and longs for the familiar. In the pedagogic relationship between these two, there exists the understanding that Higher Education is basically a slightly-more-grown-up version of school; that any material relating to cognitive challenge will appear late in the syllabus. Fragile Learners are not necessarily students in institutions of Higher Education, as we have discussed; nor must they be students of an academic or practical subject. We as educators are also Fragile Learners: or at least, if we are to develop our practice, we are Fragile Learners. Those who show no doubt are those whose teaching has not evolved. The imperative to experiment and fail from time to time is the best possible spur to invention. We can destroy and re-create; but equally, we can *be* destroyed and we can *be* re-created.

When we talk of barriers to learning, we should probably remember that barriers are sometimes erected for our own protection; they stop us entering a dangerous area. Alternatively, a barrier might be put in place to prevent us from seeing something that we have been told that we must not see. The ribbon that designates a crime scene springs to mind: a tokenistic boundary-assertion if ever there was one, the ribbon would be insufficient a deterrent to anyone was genuinely keen to enter. The barrier appeals to our intermingled senses of wilful naïveté, self-protection and paramnesiac blindness.

The moment of revelation is not a moment at all. It is more akin to the oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. Or to put it another way, the so-called ‘moment’ of revelation is apt to appear and disappear: the joy of acceptance is

only made the sweeter by the unconscious understanding that it might leave you while you take the next breath; and similarly, the seeking is as satisfying as the apprehending.

How can we reduce the probability of fragility? We can emphasise an approach of incremental learning. Of our learners we can expect more and challenge more. We can encourage deep learning approaches and find (or create) ways to motivate those who do not seem engaged. Even with entry requirements in place, students of a very wide range of abilities might be brought together in Higher Education.

But perhaps, when all is said and done, it is a case of: *once a Fragile Learner, always a Fragile Learner*. For the five years that it took me to complete this PhD submission, I was a Fragile Learner myself, on many more than one occasion. What broke my own learning was more than the predictable mid-project doldrums: feelings of inadequacy, shame, regret, anger and abandonment occasionally jostled together, and there were very real barriers to learning caused by institutional processes and the demands of work. Nevertheless, in this moment of completion, I must rejoice in the fact that any fragility that once steered me is now overcome. Committed to the basic principles of lifelong learning and to learning from one another, as I am and always have been, this Fragile Learner has proved resilient.

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## Chapter Two: Synopses of Submitted Papers

As part of this submission I attach seven previously published academic papers. All of these submissions were peer reviewed and published in sector-leading publications, as follows.

1.

Mathew, D. (2014) E-Learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking. *E-learning and Digital Media* Vol. 11 Number 2.

Reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

This paper views the temporal dimensions of e-learning through a psychoanalytic lens, and asks the reader to consider links between online learning and psychoanalysis. It argues that time and its associated philosophical puzzles impinge on both psychoanalytic theory and on e-learning at two specific points. The first is in the distinction between unconscious mental activity and conscious thinking. In psychoanalysis we would talk of the distinction between primary and secondary processes, and here the paper notes the learner's disregarding of the category of time in the former, and the learner's cognizance of it in the latter, exploring some of the characteristics of both of these processes. The learner's sense of time is a result of experiencing delay between desire and satisfaction. Here, the wish-fulfilling propensities of the primary processes deny time, whereas the adaptive propensities of the secondary processes lead to its discovery. The second specific point of interest is a viewing of Freud's

theory of memory from a contemporary pedagogic standpoint. Freud's theory of memory assumes that all past experiences are represented in the present and are capable of manifesting an effect on the present. This chapter asks the reader to consider how this might challenge the learner.

2.

Mathew, D (2013) Prison Language: A psychoanalytic approach to the language of British young offenders in the twenty-first century. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 22, Issue 2. DOI:10.1080/0803706X.2011.652166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2011.652166>

Reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

In this paper I present and analyse the phenomenon of a specific language that was spoken within the walls of a maximum security prison in the south-east of England between 2006 and 2007. In doing so, I look at the adolescent who becomes an offender, and how his language is thereby altered, here exploring language in groups and drawing on Freud and Bion, as well as the sociological contributions of Emery and Goffman, and the linguistic contribution of Teresa Labov. Examining the social structures that the language enforced, I examine my own role within and outside the prisoners' language, and explore what the prisoners learned from me and my language, and vice versa. I explore the nature of learning a language inside a prison, and examine the need for an homogeneity of language and the

social adhesive in the language used. I look at my experience of one-to-one teaching vs. group teaching: specifically, the differences in the language used by the prisoners in these different scenarios, and try to determine to what extent language comes from outside influences and to what extent it forms and permutes inside. Using actual examples, I argue that despite the exuberance and inventiveness of the language, its usage follows Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in that there is an attempt to reduce excitation. Finally, I regard prison language as a psychic retreat, drawing on the work of Steiner, Meltzer, Emanuel, and Leader (among others); and I ask questions not only about the prisoners, but also about the function of learning inside a prison itself, while regarding the language used as a depressive defence. No identifying reference to any single prisoner, or any specific crime, has been included in these pages. The people and the places that are alluded to throughout have been rendered anonymous.

### 3.

Mathew, D (2011) The Absence of 'E'. IADIS – International Association for Development of the Information Society – International Conference, e-Learning 2011, Rome, Italy, 20 - 23 July 2011 <http://www.elearning-conf.org/> Proceedings: ISBN: 978-972-8939-38-0

Mathew, D (2011) The Absence of 'E'. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. Volume 16 Number 4 December 2011. ISSN 1359-6748.

Reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

Barely thirty years on from the advent of distance learning as we recognise it today, it has already become uncommon for a learner to embark on a programme of education that does not involve frequent access to the Internet; but if a course does not revolve around the Internet, is it in any way inferior and is the learner disadvantaged? Two of the purposes of this paper are to examine two distance learning programmes, one of which involves Young Offenders serving long sentences, and to explore whether or not learners with restricted Internet access are destined to lose out in an educational setting. In doing so, we also examine learner anxiety and organisational anxieties and the implications for pastoral care.

The paper compares the learning experiences of two sets of learners enrolled on distance learning programmes, one of which has no access to the Internet, and one of which has only access to the Internet. Is the World Wide Web a necessary tool (a vital tool?) for distance learning, or has a certain prophecy—that learning conducted via the Web will be the future, and the future is now—become self-fulfilling? Can a distance learning programme thrive and succeed without the Internet, or is it the case that because, in the minds of many, ‘distance learning’ actually equates to ‘Internet education’, it is unlikely that a contemporary programme will be able to offer much to a learner who is deprived of a computer?

4.

Mathew, D (2011) From Fatigue to Anxiety: Implications for Educational Design in a Web 2.0 World. IADIS International Conference, WWW/Internet 2011, Rio de Janeiro,

Brazil, 5-8/11/2011. <http://www.internet-conf.org/> Proceedings: ISBN978-989-8533-01-2

Mathew, D. (2012) From Fatigue to Anxiety? Implications for educational design in a Web 2.0 world. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*. Volume 9 Number 2. <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=17036642&ini=aob>

Reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

This paper argues that as educators moving into a Web 2.0 world, we are likely to experience anxiety. Not only is this anxiety understandable, it is a healthy response to a perception of an older (and worn out) version of the Internet that is all that we have known up to now. However, one argument might be that Web 2.0 is more than a tool for the beginnings of the future of education: it is also, in and of itself, the beginnings of the future of education. It is not only the tool to use, it is something that needs to be understood better itself.

Web 1 must be retired. This is one of the ways that a dynamic evolves: the disuse of one model is replaced by the (temporary) overuse of the next model. This chapter contends that successful educational Web 2.0 will require more balance and pedagogic poise than was shown throughout some of the early days of online education. It will not involve flashing everything all at once, for such an approach can only lead to Internet fatigue (and learner boredom). Web 2.0 is about learning from the learner. What part of the new structure is appreciated? What part is ignored? Why do these things happen? What role does the educator play in his own developmental learning of the tools of his trade? And how

does this inform his preparations for the learners' experiences? For my argument I rely on recent successes with the commissioners for two online courses at the university. Both of these commissioners were anxious education developers, but have come around to a way of thinking that includes the potential of web-based learning (at its most up-to-date).

5 & 6.

Mathew, D. (2014). Cyber Tools and Virtual Weapons: Social Media in Politics. In: B. Pătruț & M. Pătruț (Eds.) *Social Media in Politics: Case Studies on the Political Power of Social Media*. London: Springer.

Mathew, D. (2014). Conflict in Online Learning. In: P. Layne & P. Lake (Eds.) *Global Innovation of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Transgressing Boundaries*. London: Springer.

Both reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

Where 'Cyber Tools and Virtual Weapons' argues that social media is not new and explores group psychology, 'Conflict in Online Learning' argues that a necessary component of online learning design is the deliberate creation of conflict. I argue that conflict is not a by-product of creative design; it is an important ingredient in creative design; as such, it should be planned for, and the emphasis on its creation should not be downplayed. Drawing on the

work on groups by Wilfred Bion and Anton Obholzer, the paper argues that the creative urges of learners are engaged via the application of group conflict. Via an understanding of the importance of conflict and brief studies of both group formation and of conflict in groups, this reflective and theoretical paper explores learner anxiety, especially through a psychoanalytic lens.

7.

Mathew, D. The Internet is Unwell... and Will Not Be at School Today: Oppositions, Omissions and Online Anxiety. (2014). InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching. Park University (Missouri). Also available at: <http://insightjournal.park.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-Internet-is-Unwell...and-Will-Not-Be-at-School-Today-Oppositions-Omissions-and-Online-Anxiety.pdf>

Reprinted in:

Mathew, D. (2015) *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety*. London: Karnac Books.

‘The Internet is Unwell...and Will Not Be at School Today: Oppositions, Omissions and Online Anxiety’ was commissioned by the editors of *Insight Journal* in 2013 and published in 2014.

I introduced this paper with what I called ‘an abstract through a negative lens’. ‘It might be useful,’ I wrote, ‘to be explicit about what this chapter does *not* contain....’

This chapter will not contain hearty recommendations of online learning from seasoned professionals in the field, or from the confident learners who have been lucky enough to work with them. This chapter will not contain a defence of online learning.



Neither, however, is it intended as an attack on the same, or as an evagination of the manifold accounts of successful online learning projects that bespatter the World Wide Web. It will not contain a comprehensive overview of online learning practices around the globe (assuming that such a study would be possible at anything less than book length, anyway). Nor is this chapter's ambition (or that of its author) such that a more localised examination of the online learning environment in UK Universities has been undertaken. Instead of any of the above, this chapter presents a picture of a Fragile Learner, struggling and anxious in the online milieu, and attempts to view his plight through the lens of psychoanalytic applications.

In the course of researching this work, however, the author discovered a good deal of anxiety among colleagues who had been asked to work in this way for the first time in an attempt to meet learner demand. Using transcripts of short interviews with three anxious colleagues, the aim is to show how debilitating an enforced teaching role on the Internet can be, and we apply to the learning process the theoretical work of Carl Rogers, Jacques Lacan, and John Steiner. We discover that Rogers had discussed the Fragile Learner as long ago as the middle of the previous century, in all but name; and by employing a stitchworked tapestry of anecdotes and memories, the former of which are accurate and the latter of which are subject to the customary erosion caused by time, self-protection and chronic narcissism, the chapter refers to a learner's shame and humiliation in online learning.

## Chapter Three

# E-learning, time, and unconscious thinking

This chapter views the temporal dimensions of e-learning through a psychoanalytic lens, and asks the reader to consider links between online learning and psychoanalysis. It argues that time and its associated philosophical puzzles impinge on both psychoanalytic theory and on e-learning at two specific points. The first is in the distinction between unconscious mental activity and conscious thinking. In psychoanalysis we would talk of the distinction between primary and secondary processes, and here the paper notes the learner's disregarding of the category of time in the former, and the learner's cognizance of it in the latter, exploring some of the characteristics of both of these processes. The learner's sense of time is a result of experiencing delay between desire and satisfaction. Here, the wish-fulfilling propensities of the primary processes deny time, whereas the adaptive propensities of the secondary processes lead to its discovery. The second specific point of interest is a viewing of Freud's theory of memory from a contemporary pedagogic standpoint. Freud's theory of memory assumes that all past experiences are represented in the present and are capable of manifesting an effect on the present. This chapter asks the reader to consider how this might challenge the learner.

*Dualities, one: synchrony and asynchrony*

This paper views the temporal dimensions of e-learning through a psychoanalytic lens, and asks the reader to consider links between online learning and psychoanalysis. Indeed, it is not difficult to point out several comparisons between the two fields straight away, however obvious or even superficial they might seem. Both online learning and psychoanalysis rely directly on the interdependence of (at least) two stakeholder parties. Both benefit from introspection and reflection on one's previous goals, targets, achievements, and failures. Both lead the stakeholders on a journey whose map can only be glanced at when the journey begins. And both are educational—possibly therapeutic—experiences that use the concept of time productively: as a tool, as a restriction, as a source of (necessary) conflict, as a means of extraneous and self-assessment.

When time is mentioned in the context of e-learning, it is often to discuss the ramifications of—and distinctions between—synchronous and asynchronous learning. While this debate is an important one to continue, it is beyond the scope of this particular paper, although there are elements that will fit in. Broadly speaking, synchronous learning is difficult to arrange if the group of learners is scattered over continents and time zones: difficult but certainly not impossible. Being part of a group is beneficial to many learners: there is safety, perhaps, in numbers; it is easy to “hide” when one does not know the answer; there is always another student to “protect” the one who does not wish to raise his or her hand (cybereducationally speaking); and the group can act as a mask—or a shield—for the shy learner. On the other hand, however, groups bring pressure (often inadvertent pressure, but pressure nevertheless) on the learner who does not wish to stand up and be counted. Time becomes a pressure: time is ticking and the learner does not want to let people down; there is a project to complete, and the shy student's part is perhaps due.

In these fairly typical examples, the learner is aware of time, either as a place in which to secure one's sense of safety, or as a more oppressive entity, inside which one must execute a given task. Time has become something rigid, something unmoveable; the learner, even if he or she is given to full participation on the course, is somewhat bound by synchronous-time classes or activities. At this point we might draw another comparison with psychoanalysis: in psychoanalytic terms, a

learner acutely aware of time (as a concept, as a reality touching him- or herself, as a guiding factor, or as a restraint) might be said to be in the throes of secondary processes, as Sigmund Freud described them in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1950a). Even if we accept that such an early work of Freud's has more of an inspirational value than a scientific value, we might posit several suggestions as a result of a fresh reading of this work.

Furthermore, while a certain corollary follows—that asynchronous learning is to the primary processes as synchronous learning is to the secondary, especially with the notion of the learner getting “lost” in time that seems without margins—we must also acknowledge that the comparison is neither complete nor absolute, more a guideline. The issue of unconscious thinking and how this links with time is far more problematic an enigma than that which might be “solved” via simple linguistic substitution. Some of the issues attached are explored in the rest of this chapter.

### *Dualities, two: primary and secondary processes*

Primary and secondary processes, as introduced by Freud (1950a) and developed by him in the following decades, are differentiated in a variety of ways. Fundamental to an understanding of these distinctions is the concept of desire and the term *cathexis*. Cathexis refers to the process of investing emotional or mental energy in an object, person, or idea. Psychoanalytically speaking, several things happen, either simultaneously or close together. The first is that desire unleashes a process of psychic discharge; the second is an intervention whereby the psyche is empowered (or enabled) to “distinguish between a perception and a memory (idea)” (pp. 324–325). This latter is achieved via the *deferring of hallucinatory satisfaction*. Freud writes of the

wishful cathexis to the point of hallucination . . . which involve a complete expenditure of defense are described by us as psychical primary processes; by contrast, those processes which are only made possible by a good cathexis of the ego, and which represent a moderation of the foregoing, are described as secondary psychical processes. (pp. 326–327)

In such a metaphorical framework, the learner's sense of time is a result of experiencing a delay between desire and satisfaction: this can

only happen as part of the secondary processes; in the *primary* processes the learner disregards time altogether. In other words, the wish-fulfilling propensities of the primary processes deny time, whereas the adaptive propensities of the secondary processes lead to its discovery.

When Freud moved his thinking on to the work done by dreams (Freud, 1900a), he referred to the circulating energy as “libido” and claimed that it is an actualisation of desire that converts hidden thoughts into the images that fill our dreams. “The intensities of the individual ideas,” he wrote, “become capable of discharge en bloc and pass over from one idea to another” (1900a, p. 595). With reference to the primary processes of the dream, the restlessness of unbound energy is one of its characteristics (and parenthetically we might add that dreams themselves are often “timeless” in tone and feeling; time is manipulated, crushed or elasticised). If the primary processes are “directed towards securing the free discharge of the quantities of excitation”, the secondary processes “succeed in inhibiting this discharge” (p. 599)—indeed, it might be argued that in the midst of these secondary processes, our thoughts become more “real” . . . and what is more real for a learner than an eager appreciation of the changing of the clock face? In other words:

The first wishing seems to have been a hallucinatory cathecting of the memory of satisfaction. Such hallucinations, however, if they were not to be maintained to the point of exhaustion, proved to be inadequate to bring about the cessation of the need, or, accordingly, the pleasure attaching to satisfaction. A second activity or, as we put it, the activity of a second system became necessary . . . (pp. 598–599)

Freud expands further:

When I described one of the psychical processes occurring in the mental apparatus as the “primary” one, what I had in mind was not merely considerations of relative importance and efficiency; I intended also to choose a name which would give an indication of its chronological priority. It is true that, so far as we know, no psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only, and that such an apparatus is to that extent a theoretical fiction. But this much is a fact: the primary processes are present in the mental apparatus *from the first*, while it is only *during the course of life* that the secondary processes unfold. (1900, p. 603, my italics)

For every single one of us (including our learners), therefore, an unawareness of time—or a misunderstanding of time, lodged in the unconscious—is present from the beginning; our perception of deadlines and course lengths arrives later.

### *Memory/anxiety*

The second point of interest is a viewing of Freud's theory of memory—from a contemporary pedagogic standpoint. Freud's theory of memory assumes that all past experiences are represented in the present and are capable of manifesting an effect on the present; but how might this assumption challenge the contemporary learner? While the response to such a question can only be hypothetical, some of the suppositions thrown up are powerful. We might assume (based on a simplistic reading of Freud) that a learner who has had a happy childhood will be a happy student, and vice versa. A set of bad memories (with no emotional resolution to them) will result in a constantly angry or embittered learner.

We know these interpretations to be incorrect—or at least not provably consistent. Learners arrive at the start of their online course with any number of suppositions, anxieties and/or fears to “guide” them through their opening minutes or weeks (depending on how long it takes for the online tutor to establish a condition of calm and healthy educational endeavour). However, at the very least it is important to note that a poor pedagogic experience in the past might well make a learner wary and on the look-out for flaws and arguments, even if this learner is not fully conscious of this fact. Similarly, a learner with a previously inadequate educational experience might project onto the (unseen) tutor the very aspects of him- or herself that s/he finds it hard to accept about his/her own personality: for example, if the learner is lazy but would rather feel indignant, it is not impossible that the learner will accuse the tutor of laziness, given the least provocation or the first opportunity to do so. As Melanie Klein (1946, pp. 6–9) informed us early on, projection “helps the ego to overcome anxiety by ridding it of danger and badness”.

According to Freudfile (2012), anxiety is a “state of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear resulting from the anticipation of a realistic or fantasised threatening event or situation, often impairing physical and

psychological functioning". Anxiety is a component of any new educational experience (perhaps any new experience at all), and no less so when the learning is online. However, this anxiety is not shown by, and does not belong to, the learner, him- or herself. Far from it: as I argue elsewhere (Mathew, 2012), we are educators moving deeper and further into a Web 2.0 world, and as such we are also likely to experience anxiety. (Anxiety is not a student's sole responsibility; it is not solely a student's responsibility either.) Not only is anxiety understandable, it is an important part of the educational process (as it is for learners) and a healthy response to a perception of an older, more tired out version of the Internet—the only version that we have known up to now. Although our learners might be younger than us (in the main), they also have the capacity to reflect on the time that has been spent on their learning to date, and to evaluate the positives and the negatives of their educational programme. Even this act of reflection engages the student's awareness of time, the critical and self-critical faculties, and the memory. For if it is true that anxiety has implications for the *design* of Web 2.0 educational materials (for educators), the obverse is also true—that the design of Web 2.0 educational materials has implications for anxiety, for us and for our learners.

As Web 1 is retired, the learner uses an unconscious awareness of pedagogic time, not only to acknowledge the passing of Web 1, but also to contemplate the possible path to Internet fatigue (and learner boredom). This is the student, looking to the future: the learning resource, *in and of itself*, has become a way for the learner to gauge time. But this is also the student, anxiously peering into a learning resource that might resemble (though not equate to) what Jacques Lacan referred to as the Real: that which erupts when we are forced to yield to the knowledge of the materiality of our existence, with this acceptance often regarded as problematic or traumatic. Because the Real is impossible to imagine or to integrate into the symbolic order, it is also (again, *in and of itself*) impossible; and it is this very characteristic of being impossible that gives the Real its traumatic quality—it may only be experienced as traumatic gaps in the symbolic order, the symbolic being what Lacan described as "the determining order of the subject" (Sheridan, 1994).

Returning to Klein for a moment, there are other situations other than the one where the learner projects his or her own "bad" parts onto the online tutor. Klein goes on to explain an almost opposite

scenario (*ibid.*), in which the learner identifies *too well* with a tutor who is perceived as friendly and giving—the clear implication being that in terms of the teaching environment, any extreme is to be shunned or avoided. “Introjection of the good object is also used by the ego as a defense against anxiety,” Klein writes; in other words, the creation of a “perfect” teacher is no more desirable than one that the student loathes (or fears). In fact, the “processes of splitting off parts of the self and projecting them into objects are thus of vital importance for normal development as well as for abnormal object-relation. The effect of introjection on object relations is equally important.”

This leads us to one of Freud’s and Klein’s most important successors, Wilfred Bion. In addition to Freud’s pioneering work (on memory and on many other subjects), it seems prudent to mention Bion’s work on containment and reverie, even if Bion refers mainly to the mother–child bond. One of Bion’s many conjectures is that the function of the primary care-taker is to “receive” and “contain” the unwanted or painful affects—the experience of feelings or emotions—from the infant, in order to modify them and return them to the child in a form that can be tolerated by him or her. Bion uses the metaphor further in the relationship between therapist and patient (where the therapist must process the patient’s more traumatic affects); whereas I have argued previously (Mathew, 2011) that a tutor in an online milieu is obliged to assume an analogous responsibility. Whatever the pairing, the psychic work is done by the “care-giver”—cradling the child/patient/learner in the mind, and by employing memory and reverie in such a way that an awareness of time and time passing is all but impossible to ignore.

### *Entropy*

We understand that time (as most people perceive it) goes in only one direction. It is possible to cook a meal from raw ingredients, for example; it is not possible to un-cook your side of beef. It is possible to remember the past but not the future. It is possible for entropy to mess up our bookshelves but not for our desk to be tidied on entropy’s same visit. In the same way that we understand that it is impossible for the universe to remain static, we understand that time is connected to its restless nature. We also comprehend, on the other hand, of course, that it is possible to make choices that affect our future but not our pasts!



Entropy will bring this chapter to its conclusion, as it will for everything else. In an interview conducted by a journalist named Erin Biba (2010), a Caltech theoretical physicist named Sean Carroll had the following to say on the subject:

Entropy is just a measure of how disorderly things are. And it tends to grow. That's the second law of thermodynamics: Entropy goes up with time, things become more disorderly . . . [but] why was the entropy ever low to begin with? Why were the papers neatly stacked in the universe? Basically, our observable universe begins around 13.7 billion years ago in a state of exquisite order, exquisitely low entropy. It's like the universe is a wind-up toy that has been sort of puttering along for the last 13.7 billion years and will eventually wind down to nothing. But why was it ever wound up in the first place? Why was it in such a weird low-entropy unusual state?

Carroll raises some interesting questions, and ones which might have inspired the interest and admiration of Freud himself (in a theoretical universe in which the two men shared a time-stream and a coffee *mit schlag*). In fact, Freud himself wrote of the inevitable descent towards decay in "On transience" (Freud, 1916a), nearly a century earlier. All things move towards their end, is the basic message; but Freud questions why this needs to be seen as a negative thing. He writes:

Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal . . . A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely.

Perhaps it seems like a stretch to apply Freud' thinking here to the topic of online learning, but there are parallels. Our learners know that they are moving through time towards the end of a course. The course will "decay" and "die": it is our responsibility to ensure that for the length of time that it runs, it remains a "thing of beauty" that our learners can admire and cherish. We do this via the application of sound pedagogy, of course, but also via some of the techniques of time

that are at our disposal—good pacing and appropriately timed assessments, for example. Although the course will finish (and fade), it will shine with best practice, in all its pre-entropic glory. An awareness of a finish line, a deadline, is every bit as important to an online learner as it is to a learner who is physically present in a classroom. The ticking clock is a tool in itself.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has been a reading of the subject of e-learning through a psychoanalytic lens. Among the many things that Freud and those who followed his lead have taught us is that time is an unignorable factor in most human endeavour; by extension we can apply this easily to e-learning and e-learners. Although a learner might not be actively checking the time every couple of minutes, an awareness of its passing is like distant drums beating at the back of his mind. We have discussed how the commonly thought-of time (in the sense of synchronous learning) is but one interpretation: time features also as a way of being analogous with Freud's notions of the primary and secondary processes. Furthermore, time—or rather one's awareness of time—is the trigger for a certain degree of useful anxiety . . . and then the surplus anxiety that becomes counterproductive. This anxiety might be connected to the learner's previous experiences with technology or with education (or with both), the inference being that for our learners, anxiety and memory are good partners—might even be interdependent. If Freud's theory of memory—that all past experiences are represented in the present and are capable of manifesting an effect on the present—is correct, and if his subsequent notion of the usefulness of something having a finite time-span, we might only have a small window of time through which to reach our learners.

Psychoanalysis tells us much about the human condition, albeit largely at the level of metaphor. It is the charge of the educator to employ this knowledge, in order to improve the student experience. Although technology changes rapidly, pedagogy does not; the idea of challenging students to improve their educational experience goes back at least as far as Aristotle! But we have our students for short periods of their and our lives. It is imperative to use the opportunity wisely and memorably, before time runs out.



## E-Learning, Time and Unconscious Thinking

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## Chapter Four

# Prison language

I present and analyse the phenomenon of a specific language that was spoken within the walls of a maximum security prison in the south-east of England between 2006 and 2007. In doing so, I look at the adolescent who becomes an offender, and how his language is thereby altered, here exploring language in groups and drawing on Freud and Bion, as well as the sociological contributions of Emery, Goffman, and Messerschmidt, and the linguistic contribution of Teresa Labov. Examining the social structures that the language enforced, I examine my own role within and outside the prisoners' language, and explore what the prisoners learned from me and my language, and vice versa. I explore the nature of learning a language inside a prison, and examine the need for a homogeneity of language and the social adhesive in the language used. I look at my experience of one-to-one teaching *vs.* group teaching: specifically, the differences in the language used by the prisoners in these different scenarios, and try to determine to what extent language comes from outside influences and to what extent it forms and permutates inside. Using actual examples, I argue that despite the exuberance and inventiveness of the language, its usage follows Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in that there is an attempt to reduce excitation. Finally, I regard prison language as a

psychic retreat, drawing on the work of Steiner, Meltzer, Emanuel, and Leader (among others); and I ask questions not only about the prisoners, but also about the function of learning inside a prison itself, while regarding the language used as a depressive defence.

No identifying reference to any single prisoner, or any specific crime, has been included in these pages. The people and the places that are alluded to throughout have been rendered anonymous.

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I present and analyse the phenomenon of a specific language that was spoken by offenders within the walls of a maximum security prison in the south-east of England between 2006 and 2007, at which time I worked on site every weekday. Reflecting on this time of my life and career, I see that I had at least two choices with reference to this new means of communication: I could ignore it and insist on a more orthodox mode of speech from the young men in my care (and no doubt fail to achieve my aims); or I could embrace these linguistic deviations and this creativity, and learn something new and exciting (although to what end was not immediately apparent). As Goffman writes in *Asylums*:

any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it . . . a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. (Goffman, 1961, p. 7)

What I experienced was immersive learning in its truest, most obvious application. I worked as an education coordinator, managing a team of ten lecturers in literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ironically enough), but I also had a full teaching timetable. From the beginning of my time at the prison, I had no choice but to be aware of a powerful language that was spoken by the offenders, and immediately I became intrigued by its variations and its energy. Partly for my own amusement, partly for reasons of career progression, and partly spurred on by instincts of personal safety, I

started to note down some of the key words and phrases used, some of which were brand new to me, some of which were well-worn words given freshness and new life by being grown in a different context, and some of which were deliberately confusing.

What I heard was not merely slang, or not exactly—not if we assume a broad definition of slang to be ephemeral terms used by a group in order to distinguish them from other groups—for I believe the purpose of prison language to be both more ambitious and more complicated in intent. Nor was it contemporary street slang (although there was cross-pollination between the street and the prison); it was not modish adolescent slang either, although again one must take adolescence into account, given the actual and emotional ages of the offenders in question. Prison language is not simply jargon either, if by jargon we might agree on a definition of a professional language that lends itself to the precise discussion of subjects related to a given vocation. However, by concatenating slang and jargon, and by bringing in cant—a form of verbal delivery that is employed to muddle comprehension completely for those not accepted by the group—we might arrive at a clearer picture of prison language.

*Adolescent to offender (or, “Back in the day, now on the in . . .”)*

In order to examine the phenomenon of young offenders and their language inside a prison, it seems germane to unpack the two concepts in this symbiotic relationship. The first of these, of course, is that of the prison itself. In summary, the prison holds approximately 400 young male adults (aged eighteen to twenty-one) who are serving long sentences for crimes of violence, sexual offences, repeated thefts, and other repeated misdemeanours. It is an extremely challenging population—challenging for the prison staff who manage the day-to-day running of the establishment, but also for the inmates themselves it is regarded as a tough prison—and it includes a large number of men who are serving indeterminate sentences for the public's protection (IPP).

Some of the accommodation dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. There are eight wings, including a wing that houses prisoners who are at risk from other prisoners (known locally as Fraggie Rock<sup>1</sup> or the Puppydog Wing, both of which references to youth—a children's programme and a childish reference to dogs, respectively—are the

result of the incorrect but self-defensive perception among other inmates that most of the offenders on this wing are not only sex offenders, but specifically *child* sex offenders). Another wing is nicknamed the Honeymoon Wing (a reference to shared cell occupancy, otherwise unknown in the prison). There are kitchens and gardens, an industrial laundry, and a waste recycling factory. There are exercise facilities—a gym and a swimming pool—and then of course there is the education block, where I spent most of my working day.

Goffman (1961, p. 15) classes a prison as a type of “total institution”—one “whose total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside”. He adds: “A third type of total institution is organized to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue: jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps” (p. 16). Fifty years on, there might be campaigners who would dispute the part about the prisoners’ welfare not being a key issue, but for now, let us remind ourselves that the interrelated tasks of a modern prison fall under the headings of punishment and rehabilitation.<sup>2</sup> Or to put it another way, in the more recent words of Emery (1990, p. 513), prison differs “from hospitals—medical and mental—and from religious, educational, and political institutions in that it is based on the premise of doing something against the wishes of its inmates, and usually against their interests”. The more things change, we might say, the more they stay the same.

“A basic social arrangement in modern society,” Goffman continues, “is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life”, where “each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike”, and in which “all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials” (p. 17).

Compare this situation with our perceived notions of young offenders having been (until fairly recently) running wild, and I believe that Goffman’s delineation goes some way to helping to explicate the



prison's unpleasantly bleak psychic environment. Nearly everything that an offender has held dear (or at least close) has been snatched away from him, and most people inside the prison's walls could feel the loss, or the subsequent lack, in kind. For it was undeniably the case that throughout my time there, and certainly throughout the physical space that the prison takes up, a somber, gloomy atmosphere was palpable. Even as an employee of a college (rather than an employee of the prison itself) and with a set of keys that meant that I was fairly free to come and go as I pleased, I was conscious of the enduringly oppressive mood inside the prison. But what caused it?

Perhaps it was simply a strong example of my own fears and prejudices, projected not only on to the prisoners themselves but also on to this, the safest of contained spaces. If so, I would also believe that it was furthermore a strong example of the offenders' fears and prejudices, projected into the same space, but also on to me, an outsider from "on road", whether I wished to receive the projection or not.

If we accept that the vast majority of the offenders, despite any outward appearance of cocksure bravado, are secretly terrified of their incarceration, we might have a plausible explanation for the "herd" instinct of a shared, protective language, might we not?

Referring to adolescence *per se*, Meltzer (2008, p. 145) writes:

In a strange way language becomes very concrete and at the same time fluid, so that argumentation tends to lose its anchorage in observation and experience and becomes a duel of verbal facility, of aggressive assertion, and moral blackmail where the implication of cowardice is intimidating above all.

How much truer do Meltzer's words appear when we incorporate the fact that these particular adolescents will give up what remains of their youths to the rigours—and the boredom—of a punitive system?

Into this container comes the offender. In order to assess how this offender learns a new language inside the new establishment, we should look at where he has come from and take into account the linguistic systems he carries with him. Referring to adolescent slang, Labov (1992, p. 341) writes:

I find three main categories of terms: (1) those for labelling people; (2) those for painting people, activities, and places positively or negatively; and (3) those for ways of spending leisure, focused upon

having fun (including sex, parties, and substance use and abuse)—as well as doing nothing at all.

It is interesting to note that, although these categorisations were present among the offenders' speech in the prison (broadly speaking), the referents had understandably changed for the speakers. Labelling people, for example, had a fairly low currency: apart from labelling the offenders on the Wing for Vulnerable Prisoners "Fraggles", and apart from the occasional disdainful reference to an offender's crime (as in "He a rapist",<sup>3</sup> the implication being that he, the subject, disgusts the speaker of this sentence), for most of the offenders, people were either "on the out", "on road" (i.e., free, outside the Prison) or "on the in". These were the key distinctions—although there were some other ways of labelling, such as "hench" for "big" or "muscular", and "yoot" for "youth" or "boy" ("That yoot hench, blood!"), which are terms that are also used outside the prison—it can perhaps to some extent be said that they have "leaked" out. (More examples are discussed in a later section of this chapter.)

Labelling terms did not include offensively racist terms, or at least not routinely. Interestingly, the prisoners seemed enlightened when it came to inter- and intra-racist politics—far more so than one might have imagined. In the prison, there was little in the way of class or race distinction, and neither was there any "template" of a young man who used prison language. Although Goffman's words—"The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members" (1961, p. 8)—rings irrefutably true, it is important to note that prison language is not race-specific, being utilised equally and without prejudice by white, black, and Asian prisoners.

Neither is it defined by *social* class: although it is fair to remark that, at that particular time, the vast majority of offenders were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, it was by no means a guarantee, and apart from anything else this argot achieved, or tried to achieve (such as secrecy from prison officers or from other staff), it also went some way towards homogenising accents and destroying class fences.

Most peculiarly, perhaps, in an establishment where there was a very tightly observed hierarchy, with (say) a gun crime regarded as "better" or more "noble" than a sex crime, this language was largely

generic from the perpetrator of one offence to the next. As Emery (1990, p. 517) puts it:

Unlike most cultures, the inmate culture does not arise from evaluations of men who are freely engaged in common endeavours, and consequently it does not define the characteristics and potentialities of the inmate group beyond a crude typing of inmate and staff roles and a cultural definition of inmate suffering and its conditions . . . It is a culture without heroes or villains . . .

Or to put it another way, prison language was a great leveller. But why should this be the case? In the footsteps of (inter alia) Freud (1921c) and Bion (1961), we know that we can assume a recognisable convergence of language function between most members of any group, however loosely defined and informally congealed; but is this need for a homogeneity of language in order that prisoners can fit in with each other? Or is there an element of being moulded by the environment (regardless of how strenuously this would be denied by the speakers themselves)?

Furthermore, is the language—or the function of the language—even as radical as it seems? It is certainly true that, in a prison, one of the very few matters that cannot be controlled by those in charge is that of speech—or more specifically that of lexicon and syntax—so shall we assume that the offenders used the system as a form of rebellion, or paradoxically as a mode of comfort, following Freud's (1920g) theory of reducing tension in "Beyond the pleasure principle"? Arguably, to all of these questions we could answer yes.

Offenders who have been found guilty of crime X do not necessarily associate only with others who have been found guilty of the same crime. Putting routine disagreements aside (of which there were many, and which were occasionally murderous, literally murderous, in intent), the use of language acts as a sort of social adhesive; but what does this say about the prisoners themselves? Emery (1990, pp. 513–514) continues on from the quotation above:

The basic psychological fact about the inmates of a prison is that they are, with few exceptions, confined against their will in conditions of life not of their making and seen by them as depriving and degrading relative to the life they would be leading if free . . . the inmates (the "objects" handled by the institution) are defined by the State, not by a subordinate part of the society, as a morally inferior class of persons . . .

And then, in a sense corroborating Labov's findings, Emery adds: "They see themselves as deprived of their normal freedom of access to pleasurable and interesting pursuits and to those things (alcohol, tobacco, gambling and sex) that play an important role in their culture in handling intra-personal tensions" (pp. 513–514). Not to mention, of course, the things that were responsible, in one way or another, for landing them in prison in the first place.

"The existence of hatred," Emery goes on, "creates the psychological schism between inmates and staff that is a necessary prerequisite to the emergence and maintenance of a secret inmate world within the prison" and "the hatred of officers, insofar as it emerges as a common feeling, provides a common denominator for joint inmate action that is otherwise lacking" (p. 516). Although Meltzer believes that adolescent "recklessness smacks of despair and suicidal longings" (2008, p. 146), it is perhaps Žižek (2000) who sums up the prisoner experience with more realism, optimism, and more chilling precision, in *The Fragile Absolute*:

The only true solution is therefore to fully accept the rules of prison life and then, within the universe governed by these rules, to work out a way to beat them. In short, inner distance and daydreaming about Life Elsewhere in effect enchain me to prison, whereas full acceptance of the fact that I am really there, bound by prison rules, opens up a space for true hope. (p. 139)

### *Learning a language inside a prison (or, "Are you listening?")*

The first encounter I had with inappropriate language while inside the prison had nothing to do with anything that came from a young offender's mouth. Oddly enough, it was the term *young offenders* itself. It feels inadequate—twee, almost, not much of a climb up from *naughty boys*—or perhaps my involvement has made me oversensitive to the gulf between the title and the action that earned it. However, if the young men in prison—who constituted what many would refer to as the worst of the worst: murderers, rapists, and perpetrators of the unspeakable against the impotent—could be referred to with a straight face as *young offenders*, the young offenders themselves could arrive at constructions every bit as misleading.

The fact that many of these young men would enjoy being known as “the worst of the worst” might help to simplify matters: those in question were often too young (emotionally, at any rate) to understand fully what they had done, or to care. (For many young men, psychology courses were in place, the learning outcomes of which were to convince them of the ramifications of their crimes.) The further discovery that one term of endearment between the men was “rudeboy”—again, almost charmingly cute—along with more family-derivative terms such as “blood”, “bruv”, “cuz”, “fam” (abbreviated for “brother”, “cousin”, and “family”, respectively)—once more highlights a certain paradox: that while each individual was a bad individual and very definitely his own man, there was comfort to be had in sophomoric but nameless male bonding, and also in surrogate families, while inside the walls.

Bonding and identity, of course, were and are also emphasised via language beyond direct apostrophes. In fact, if we ask what it means to learn a language inside a prison—that is, what is actually happening, and why it happens—we might look towards *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921c), in which Freud explores group formation and the giving-up of individual ego ideals in favour of the group ideal, with a group being “a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego” (p. 116).

Forty years later, in *Experiences in Groups* (1961), Bion expands on this and others of Freud’s theories (notably Freud, 1930a) with a characteristically enlightening précis: “Freud chose the development of language as an instance of group activity of high mental order” (p. 187, **emphasis added**). Bion also notes that “there is no way in which the individual can, in a group, ‘do nothing’—not even by doing nothing” (p. 118), which goes some way to explaining, perhaps, the virus-like nature of the language—the way it spread and the manner in which so few prisoners remained totally uninfected (see below).

Both Freud’s and Bion’s theories ring true. In my experience, something analogous happens in a prison environment, where learning the new language is not simply something to do to pass time; where, in fact, for all its eventual offhand delivery, the matter of a new language is a serious business. By its own rules, it is rigid and grammatically correct (although it does not sound so to the untrained ear), and it is partially influenced by British gang culture (by “chat on road”), but

also a development from the same. Indeed, one would be forgiven for believing that prison language must vary considerably depending on the given facility's geographical location and corresponding demographics. Indeed, with the prison being situated in the south-east of England, there were the predictable London terms in evidence: a "strap" for a gun, a "whip" for a car, a "yard" for a home, and "ends" for a geographical area; there were also some well-worn terms that were generically prison-oriented, such as "screws" for officers, a "fish" for a new inmate, "hooch" for illegally brewed alcohol, and "shiv" (a homemade knife, and a term of Romany origin, of all influences).

But there were also parts of speech that are in far less common usage: a "parakeet", for example (an officer who mimics a superior officer), or an "ostrich" (a prisoner with an indeterminate sentence: he's called ostrich because of the length of his "bird"<sup>4</sup>). Here and elsewhere, to use a term borrowed from Freud's much earlier paper—*The Project for a Scientific Psychology*, 1950a)—there is a strong element of "endogenous" language-acquisition. Even if we accept that such an early work of Freud's has more of an inspirational value than a scientific value, we might posit several suggestions. Incarceration produces an endemic in-group language among its prisoners, one that even the officers feel obliged to take up, possibly for reasons similar to those of my own (including personal safety, as above). It is also interesting to note that in *The Project* (p. 299), we can see a fair (premeditative) metaphor for what we have been discussing:

There are two classes of neurones: (1) those which allow Q'n [psychical quantity] to pass through as though they had no contact-barriers and which, accordingly, after each passage of excitation are in the same state as before, and (2) those whose contact-barriers makes themselves felt, so that they only allow Q'n to pass through with difficulty or partially. The latter class may, after each excitation, be in a different state from before and they thus afford a *possibility of representing memory*.

That is, we might think of the prison itself as a vast metaphorical organism, as dedicated to the idea of physical prototypes of repression as the one that Freud details. Why not? Undoubtedly, some language creeps in via the phi system of neurones ( $\phi$ ), but there is much other psychical work which is endogenous, and which is represented by the psi system of neurones ( $\psi$ )—this latter system is impermeable, which

leads to a situation in which “for every excessive intrusion into consciousness there is a corresponding amnesia” (Freud, 1950a, p. 350). And it is easy to see prison language as having this implicit purpose, after all: with its frequent accompanying manic energy, it is used as a means of repression, for some prisoners—as a way of escaping, however momentarily, the stark reality of the inevitable long stretch ahead.

Of course, the prisoners were not the only ones learning a new language—although to be honest, it was the prisoners who had the greatest aptitude for doing so: there was also me, and there were also other members of staff (prison staff or outside agencies). We were all in one big classroom called the prison. Nor was my work conducted solely in the education block. Once a week, I went to the wings to conduct one-to-one sessions with offenders who, for one reason or another, could not go to a classroom: sometimes for their own protection, sometimes for the protection of others (gang rivalry was often cited as a reason for these exclusions). It was fascinating to note how the offenders’ language changed, now that it was a case of one-to-one tuition: young men whom I had heard “busting chuckles” (having a laugh) with other prisoners in other contexts—for example, while crossing the yard to the visits hall—were now without their prison language and spoke to me in an “ordinary” (i.e., “on road”) fashion.

This occasioned in me mixed feelings, I must admit. It made clear the fact that what I heard in the classroom was not only not for my benefit (as ridiculous as it seems that it ever should have been), but it was for the benefit of a group of which I was emphatically not a part. And quite possibly, given this new evidence, it was a group in which the offender himself wished to play no further part either—or at least, not until the next time that he was physically in the company of the same group—at which point the herd instinct would kick in and the offender would presumably revert to type.

Of the small percentage of prisoners who chose to opt out of the language system altogether, the overwhelming majority resided on the wing that housed the vulnerable prisoners: on “Fraggle Rock” in local parlance. It is telling and indicative, I believe, that the prisoners on this wing who opted out of the language system were also those who (by definition of the enforced security on the wing itself) would never come into contact with the young men on other wings. But this does not explain fully why some offenders changed their way of



speaking when they were in the company of only me. If the acquisition of prison language inverts the adult—child relationship—in the sense that I was quite clearly the “child” learning the established “adult” language of youths approximately half my age at the time—then I had come to learn that, as a “child”, I meant nothing to these men, other than as an imposition.

In “The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis” Lacan (2006) refers to the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and writes: “Mallarmé . . . compares the use of language to the exchange of a coin whose obverse and reverse no longer bear but eroded faces, and which people pass from hand to hand ‘in silence’ ” (p. 209). Something analogous was in place in the prison: language between a prisoner and anyone not of the prisoner’s group was trading in worn coins. The fresh and shiny currency was only handed around among members of the group. Those outside did not possess so much as a penny; or in the language itself, it’s the wrong “peas”.

*Language and the systems of threes (or, “Riding the noise . . .”)*

In *My Teaching*, Jacques Lacan (2008, p. 84) writes, “The communication function has never been the most important aspect of language”. Enigmatic and provocative to the last in this late volume, Lacan continues: “The first thing involved in communication is knowing what it means. Everybody knows that. You don’t need much experience to show that what the other is saying obviously never coincides with what he says.” But having worked with young men who did not know whether or not to hate me, I feel I may come close to comprehending some of Lacan’s struggle.

Let us look at some specific examples. A typical conversation might begin with this question: “Are you listening?”<sup>5</sup>—customarily barked at great volume, even if the interlocutors are a few metres apart from one another, or even sitting side by side. Invasive volume is an apparently necessary by-product of much authentic prison discourse, but the interesting fact is that these young men need constant confirmation that their words are being attended to. Speculating slightly, it might be the case that the speaker’s history has involved a good deal of not being listened to—or more simply that he needs a beat of time to frame his thoughts properly. At any rate, the



other man will issue the appropriate response—"I'm listening"—and the conversation can begin, with many sentences finishing with the universal catch-all question tag of "innit?" replacing any combination of "isn't he?", "weren't they?", "does it?", and so on—furthermore letting the other speaker know that a contribution is required. This is a clear example of language that has come in from the street.

At first it seemed as though prison language was a simple matter of lexical substitution. For example, "They twisted him up" is "They beat him up", or a vehicle can get twisted up, to suggest great damage. Promoting an air of great self-importance, "Allow it" is a favourite, the versatility of which is remarkable, making easy work of "Respect it", "Respect me", or even "I hear you/I understand what you're saying" . . . and "wogwun?" is a word meaning, "How's it going?" or "How are you?" Following Labov's distinctions (above) of there being categories of adolescent slang—used for labelling people, used for describing people, activities, and places positively or negatively, and used to describe ways of spending leisure—we can see some further categorisable examples. A *co-D* is a co-defendant. A *scuff* is a fight; a *shank* is a knife; a *whip* (mentioned above) is a car, so owning an *enhanced whip* is something to celebrate and brag about; and to *bust* is (weirdly) both to break wind and to open (say, a door). *Bash* is pornography, *munch* is to eat or, as a noun, food; and in the world of interpersonal relationships, a *ting* is a girlfriend, a *baby-mamma* is a girlfriend (not necessarily the same one as the "ting") with whom the prisoner has had children, the less-than-delightful terminology in the latter instance being that he would have "bred her". Alternatively, an excellent description of the weather was: The air's as cold as a Puppydog crime; and one of the best insults I have ever heard I heard in the Prison—"a mis-nomered piece of skin-waste".

To be "ghosted" is to be stood up, waiting for a visitor in the visits hall who fails to arrive (see the chapter entitled Ghosting that concludes Part I of this book)—the source event, incidentally, of many a retaliatory attack on a prison officer or a fellow offender . . . and consequently the prisoner's punishment—his "honeymoon" in the segregation unit ("Seg", or more prosaically, "going down block"). And of course, with these young men serving long custodial sentences, the subject of sex is never far away. Not to put too fine a point on it, the verb in question is "to mash".

So far, so simple: mere glossary additions. But the matter is more complex than rephrasings and abbreviations. From one of the examples above—"That yoot hench"—it will be clear that verb forms for "to be" are not, as we would view them, conventional. Frequently abandoned altogether, verb forms—if they are used—are used in the present tense. The past is spoken of as the present, but so, very often, is the future. Example: "Man! When man get to Big Man Jail . . . well, man! That when man know man blessed, rudeboy. Man know it and man allow it." Translation: "When I get to adult prison, I'll know I'm a lucky man." Or words to that effect. Nor do I believe that such omissions are the result of idleness, as I mention above; there is too much structure to this "carelessness"—too much uniformity and intent.

Something similar might be said for the re-assignment of the status of certain nouns. That some verbs work casually as nouns I have hinted above, with "munch", and there is a certain logic to this. "Man have bare munch," one "yoot" might say to another, referring to a copious amount of food in either the past, the present, or the future ("bare" being interchangeable as "a lot", "a lot of", "many", "much", and so on). But what should we make of something like "burn"? Logically, true, we can see the link to "cigarette", but unlike the latter, it is never quantified or counted via the courtesy of a plural "s". Depending on the situation, a prisoner can "go for burn" (note, not a burn) or can treat himself to "ten burn".

On the subject of plurals, Schneider (Hoffman Baruch & Serrano, 1988) has an interesting thought, albeit with a different topic as source material. She writes (p. 177):

the breasts . . . are not found in Freud's texts on women. The breast only exists for the infant's mouth. It is put in the singular. There are never breasts; this is very important because in saying breasts, one implies a hollow in between them, making us re-find that opening that Freud was so afraid of, whereas if one says "breast", it is seen as phallic, an image of what men possess. If one gives the mother only one breast, the way the Cyclops had only one eye, she is made phallic and powerful.

It is arguable, I think, that something similar is in play in the prisoners' use of (say) "man" in the singular when the context implies the plural, or even the first person singular. By using man, the prisoner lassos everyone together; everyone is dragged onto the same boat.

There is no privilege; there is no apparent manner of standing out from the crowd of like-minded individuals. I cannot draw attention to myself if I do not say I. I say man and I am therefore one of you—and one of us all. To build on Schneider's argument, man is phallic but controllable; any more than man becomes men, which would assert differences from one to the next—a loosening of the social bond. One thing that seems clear is that if I am in this prison, and I am here for a long time, I would like you to suffer with me for as long as possible.

Which brings us to the subject of time.

The original title of this essay was "O my days!"<sup>6</sup> This is not only because of its prominent standing in the world of non-offensive expressions—being uttered along with any emotion from frustration to joy, or even to kill a silence that has lingered too long—but also because of the reference to time. Time is very important to these prisoners (understandably), some of whom will next see the daylight of freedom in their thirties, and some of whom will see it even later than that, if at all. Naturally enough, if time is what they are serving, if time is what they are doing (and time is what they are riding), there are many references to time in the prisoners' word-board.

But interestingly, time goes hand in hand with a psychoanalytic theory as well: there are also divisions in the language that correspond to Freud's structural model, in the sense that there is language that can be attached to the ego, the id, and the superego, one by one. For example, it could be argued that in essence the ego corresponds to "bang up": to life inside the prison—to the here and now, to the place where the offender currently is; whereas the id is "back in the day"—it is the vocabulary of life outside the prison, in the past when the id ran wild and before the prisoner was arrested. The id's idiom is expressive and potent: although it has happened, it is often referred to in the present (as I mention), and some of these examples are the best stories with regards to humour. And finally, the superego—controlling the prisoners' guilt—is appreciatively more sober. The superego's lexicon, perhaps, is "on road": the freedom of the future, quite possibly (although not certainly) with lessons learned, with the superego ruling with a stronger sense of internal punishment.

Let us look at the structural model for a moment. First, the past. As I have suggested, "back in the day" is the nostalgic term of choice, as in "I drive enhanced whip, back in the day. Man dust that whip." (Dust is to drive or, equally as probably, to escape quickly.) This is a clear refer-

ence to the time before prison, when the id made the individual seek pleasure first. Also in this bracket, we would find constructions such as “rolling with the nines”—carrying nine-millimetre pistols—or “mashing poom-poom”—having sex. One offender, in a piece of creative writing no less (one of the few examples of prison language of the kind I am discussing being transcribed), wrote about how he had been “on the out and I’ve had a busy night—jacking cars, maybe—and I’ve wound down with hooch and a few nooses of badly-cut sniff.” Another offender related an amusing story about stealing chickens, using his girlfriend as a decoy to steer the counter assistant away:

I’m teefing<sup>7</sup> bare poultry from the supermarket, innit—it’s me and my ting. My girl. And we’re up there at the hot chicken shit. The counter, yeah? And she’s like, rah, I don’t feel well innit. But she *faking it*, rudeboy. Giving it hand to the head, right? “I don’t feel good. I need to sit *down*.” Making sure the chicken chick’s clocking<sup>8</sup> her. Getting her nice and worried, yeah? She virtually be having a cardio<sup>9</sup> innit.

Or, another example: a revenge that almost involved the purchase of a gun:

I know where to buy a strap. Friend of a friend, bruv. Not in my ends but I know where man live; it won’t take long. Man can get it in a *hot* minute . . . So I’m all for dusting over and showing the waste what time it is.<sup>10</sup> So man dust over to man’s yard. Somewhere in S, yat. Man driving enhanced two-litre whip in them day. Just going over to polish the man’s face, blood.

Or, in this case, a more traditional tale of retribution:

He put it on *passionate*, cuz. Had a fight with bare man. Make a statement innit. He have a madness with man? Man go down. No more beef. No more street beef. Bang beak. No more shit. Allow it, blood . . . Man must have done some stupidity.

The opposite of “back in the day”, referring to the future, is “to hit road”. “When I hit road, on the out, I get me a job—going straight, going legit.” Or sometimes the ambition for the future is more sexual, as in “She’s something I’d move to on the outside”—or, she is someone I find attractive.

There are plenty more mentions of time and its derivatives, some of which adhere to the lexicon of the ego, of the here and now, as in the following. If something is done quickly, it is done in “a hot minute”. If time is dragging, “time is long” (in a different context, long also means difficult), “time is sick” (again, in other contexts, *sick* being *good*) and “time is explosive”. Solitary confinement as the result of an inside misdemeanour is known as “twenty-four seven bang-up”. And what could be a simpler reference to “a long time” than the word *time* itself. For example, when a packet of my rolling tobacco of choice once fell out of my jacket pocket, one prisoner, summing up the mood of the room, calmly stated: “Gov, I ain’t seen Old Holborn in time”—the smokers among the prisoners having no choice but to opt for “twelve-point-five G.V.” (Twelve and a half grams of Golden Virginia *burn*.)

We might guess that time goes most slowly for those with life sentences—for those who will finish their sentences at a young offenders institution, then get “shipped out” to “big man jail”. These unfortunates are known to be “lifed off”. A phrase such as *lifed off* seems remarkably casual; it seems, at first breath, to have no more longevity or potency than something like *told off*. But we must remember that *lifed off* means someone—in this case, may we be reminded, a man of no more than twenty-one years of age—has been told that there is a very good chance that he will spend the rest of his life in a cell. This said, insouciance is very much the order of the day for some offenders. After he had told me of his particular crime (pre-planned violence involving weapons) and of the subsequent fifteen-year tariff that he had received, one young man simply shrugged and said: “Just one of them innit?”—meaning “It’s just one of those things, is it not?” What? A fifteen-year sentence is *just one of those things*? Yes, it is for some of these men, and it speaks volumes—I would argue—about their previous life expectancy—of what they had expected from life before crime got in their way, or saved them (depending on which offender you were to ask).

This kind of cocksure “fronting”—not allowing anyone to be privy to a true emotion—is ever-present. As I have mentioned, there is a lot of bonding; but there is also a lot of envy, as well as some long-running arguments that have been carried in from the outside (“beef on road”), and a fair amount of score-setting, rib-digging one-upmanship, in which verbs of violence (as we would view them) are used in a non-violent milieu. For example, “I *kill* you at pool; I’ll show you

what *time* it is" is no more than a boast of confident cue action on the baize, and "I kill this worksheet" is no more than a brag to the teacher that a piece of work has been successfully completed. ("Kill" as *we* know it becomes "merk".) The profanity flows thick and fast, as might be expected—as do the locally traditional petty insults: 'snitch' (informer, this one given a recent new lease of life in the UK as it has come from America), and "bumberclutt" and "bloodclot"—swear-words at the height of their powers. And yet for some offenders, manners are extremely important. A prisoner, for example, asks another to "bust him a flame" (i.e., lend him a lighter), and the second one says, "Hustle me harder" (i.e., Ask me nicely).

All of which is to suggest that undoubtedly life is tough and unrelenting "on the in". Bravado—false or otherwise—is for some of these young men the best show in town, but for many the long death is already behind the eyes, and it is my contention that despite the exuberance and inventiveness of the language, it in fact follows Freud's principles in "Beyond the pleasure principle" (1920g), in that there is an attempt to reduce excitation. But for some the excitation cannot be reduced. In the next section of this chapter, I would like us to consider the offenders who are trapped inside psychic prisons of their own devising.

*Refuge language (or, "Soon I'm gonna try not to speak . . .")*

While I worked at the prison, I met offenders who would tell me, on an individual basis, that they were "not ready" to return to the outside world . . . or in many respects, to the "real" world, or even to the (Lacanian) Real<sup>11</sup> world (and its corresponding sombre and terrifying suggestion of the void). These confessions did not often occur, but when they came my way I found them astonishing—a young man wanting to stay in prison—and, to be honest, a little frightening: frightening, I suppose, because I understood so little of what lay behind them, at the time. For example, what could it be about a prison that would seem attractive compared with the prospect of a return to freedom? Or to look at it another way, what was so petrifying about freedom that the enforced structures of the prison seemed on balance preferable? What would a perusal of "road" truly entail? The uned-itable enormity (in other words, the undeniable truth) of what has

been lost, perhaps. The recovery of parts of the self which were previously lost through the process of projective identification.

It is my contention that many of the offenders were present in what Steiner (1993) called a psychic retreat and what Meltzer (2008) called the claustrum: self-protective psychic hideaways, from which they might have no choice but to contemplate Emanuel's (2001) Void. These prisoners are deep in—locked into—a depressive position and in a depressive recognition, not only of their actions, but also of the prospects for the future; in a sense, they are in mourning, and use language both to emphasise and paradoxically disguise this state of affairs. Is safety inside the retreat actually warming and welcoming? What precisely, we might be guided to enquire from the work of Meltzer, is so attractive to a prisoner in the concept of safety itself? Meltzer writes (2008, p. 144):

it is just this word "safe" that is anathema to the adolescent, for his new size, bodily development and sexual potency make him feel invulnerable. The dangers of which he has heard his parents preach in the past are seen in the light of devices for control, analogous to hell-fire preaching . . . Restraints are enslavements, the future is simply the present extrapolated. The plethora of fantasy disguises the poverty of imagination.

In other words, the adolescent has been dragged into a new world and a horrifying mode of existence, his only anchor to the previous world (to "road", to "back in the day") being a memory of a regretted<sup>12</sup> misdemeanour and the accompanying trials of an active super-ego. For offenders who are not inside a retreat—for those I have discussed up to now, perhaps—Meltzer's accompanying words are undoubtedly appropriate, when he writes: "In the clique, the gang, the group roles shift with the changing light so that like-mindedness seems to replace any awareness of compliance with the leader of the moment . . . The reality of slavish conformity is hidden by the infinite tolerance of trivial idiosyncrasy" (p. 144); but for prisoners in mourning, what is the state of play, and what are the chances for the future?

Steiner at least hints at optimism. "It is in the process of mourning," he writes, "that projective identification is reversed and the ego is enriched and integrated" (1993, p. 59); although his words are otherwise qualified by his reference to the (female) patient in the following (p. 60):



She could internalise me as the container of the functions she projected, but she could not relinquish hold of me or allow a true separateness to develop . . . the patient continues to need the object to act as a container and . . . the projections are not truly withdrawn until a second stage is reached.

These prisoners are also failing to relinquish hold, also failing to allow a separation that is required before any form of psychic healing may take place. Instead, again in Steiner's words, for many a prisoner there exists "the realisation of the internal disaster created by his sadism and the awareness that his love and his reparative wishes are insufficient to preserve his object" (p. 60). Steiner's twin bottom lines are: "If reality cannot be faced, mourning cannot proceed and the patient cannot regain the parts of the self . . . disowned" (p. 63) and "the individual has to face his inability to protect the object" (p. 61).

To some extent, language is a way of keeping such realisms at least at temporary bay; and while I believe that the prison experience infantilises some prisoners (for all of their macho posturing), and that there is an element of child language acquisition to be used as a comparison for the situation of acquiring prison language, it is a method to self-contain a form of madness. After all, this is the experience of most of us, in the words of Bollas's *Being a Character* (1992, p. 26):

Because a day is a potential space which we characterize by choosing certain objects and releasing varied self states, it is not necessarily an act of unconscious wilfulness, as much of the time we are responding to the arrival of events sponsored by other subjects or the aleatory movements of objects. Nonetheless, each of our days begins to achieve its symbolic status as the dialectic between our unconscious wishes, needs, defenses, anxieties, and elaboratory self states engages with chance as the environment telephones us, writes to us, weathers us, offers us new books, displays wonderful-looking people, and so on.

However, this is not the experience of many prisoners, and certainly not those struggling with the void. Their punishment—or part of it, as mentioned above—is partly down to the confiscation of choices. There are no "new books"; there are no "wonderful-looking people". What there is instead is an attempt to reduce psychic excitation to level zero via means of an extravagant language into which no nonprisoner may venture. And why may no one else step upon this



sacred ground? Because we nonprisoners, we outsiders, we from “on road”, are not suffering the same long death; we are not mourning in the same fashion. We do not follow the description of Phillips (2000), who writes: “For Lacan, a person was by definition in excess of himself, an excess to himself” (p. 108), where we endeavour to keep contained, at least compared with the psychic spillages of the offenders’ lives, and where language might assume the role of blocking an unwanted identity.

Perhaps this second quotation from Bollas, also from *Being a Character*, is, if no more reassuring in context, then at least a good deal more accurate with reference to young offenders. He writes (1992, p. 17):

Certain objects, like psychic “keys”, open doors to unconsciously intense—and rich—experience in which we articulate the self that we are through the elaborating character of our response. This selection constitutes the jouissance of the true self, a bliss released through the finding of specific objects that free idiom to its articulation.

Or perhaps we should turn to Zachary Leader, and his work on the process of mourning, applying his theories accordingly. In *The New Black*, Leader (2008) asks: “once a mourning gets started, can it ever really end?” (p. 100), going on later to clarify that mourning “is not about giving up an object but about restoring one’s links to an object as lost, as impossible” (p. 134). I believe that the young men that I worked with were frequently in mourning for their own past selves—but often also for the selves that they used as their victims (whether these victims were now dead or remained alive as a consequence of the crime in question). As Leader also puts it: “Mourning is not just about mourning the lost loved one, but about mourning who we were for them” (p. 145), and “the melancholic will see him—or herself as worthless and irrevocably guilty” (p. 169).

However, it is the capable hands of Žižek, a contemporary commentator who seems to have a prolific, intelligent, and above all thought-provoking word to say on just about any subject that one can imagine, that I shall leave this chapter. One of the many startling thoughts present among the pages of *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008a) is a description of the cinematic industry that has grown out of the Second World War: “all good films about the Holocaust,” he writes,

“are comedies: it is a blasphemy to claim that the predicament of prisoners in a concentration camp was tragic—their predicament was so terrifying that they were deprived of the very possibility of displaying tragic grandeur” (p. 42). As radical as the thought appears at first glance, does the writer not have a sensible point?

Furthermore, although Žižek’s subject matter differs from my own (there is no threat of institutionalised murder in a contemporary prison), do the two situations not have matters in common? Do they not both share the obvious condition of incarceration and the effortlessly imaginable sense of dread that must be experienced by every single one of the people held within? I believe so.

And it is not such a leap to consider prison language as a genre either. By which I mean: if a system of discourse has a speaker and a listener (and in my case, an eavesdropper-cum-paparazzo), it will most likely have an audience, albeit a small one, especially given the restrictions of a prison and the frowned-upon quality of privacy. And can we not add that if there is an audience, the conversation will take on a different quality and assume a genre. Despite many appearances to the contrary, I believe the genre of prison language to be comedy, at least in the Žižekian definition.

In his typical (and typically entertaining) scattergun fashion, Žižek continues to augment his argument with references as follows: “*Troilus* plays the same structural role in Shakespeare’s opus as *Così fan tutte* among Mozart’s operas: its despair is so thoroughgoing that the only way to overcome it is through the retreat into fairy-tale magic” (p. 42). So, given the oppressive atmosphere inside the prison, perhaps we might conclude with a note of comparative optimism. Perhaps the inventiveness of the prisoners’ language is the equivalent of fairy-tale magic. It is something that the offenders can use gainfully to spirit away, however temporarily, the void. Cautiously peeking out from a psychic retreat, endeavouring to brave a venture out from the claustrum, screaming against the Real, an offender finds a morsel of magic in the words he dreams up, the worlds he shares.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have presented my first-hand experience of working with prisoners in a maximum-security prison in a way that I hope will

suggest that I feel privileged to have shared such a new and burgeoning language. If the truth be known, it was an extremely challenging job, and not one that I can imagine ever returning to; but one of the things I certainly enjoyed about it was filling in, virtually on a daily basis, a few lines of my notebook, and thereby learning something new about a society that I had known very little of up to that point. My gratitude for being able to engage with this part of the work remains, and I am happy to have been able to share a necessarily bowdlerised<sup>13</sup> version of matters mentioned during the times in question.

What is the function of learning in a prison? I still wonder. To put the question another way, is the imperative (or opportunity) to impose learning on a group of offenders beneficial or is it deliberately non-beneficial? And if it is beneficial, who is beneficial to? While a teacher's experience of putting names on a list—a list that will be used by officers to get the named prisoners out of their cells at a specific time, sometimes without their prior knowledge that this will be happening—would count as government-imposed “purposeful activity” or “meaningful activity” in the lexicon of the prison system's mandates, does this mean that the learners (the prisoners) themselves will benefit? To this day, I have mixed feelings about this matter, and I am by no means certain that I can answer it truthfully, let alone accurately. My personal experience suggests that I made a contribution, however small; however, my personal experience is emphatic in its reminder that it was an uphill battle all the way. To put it bluntly, the prisoners did not want to learn anything that I or any other member of my team had to offer. Learning was regarded as another form of punishment: yet another form of punishment in a day in which nothing else but forms of punishment happened to exist.

My view is that the process of enforcing learning on the prisoners was all but futile; the one advantage that was produced was a series of additions to my language notebook. In most respects, otherwise, I was ignored or barely tolerated: as a result, the countertransference was a strangely lonely experience, especially given the sheer numbers of offenders who were locked with me in a crowded, hot, and noisy classroom, for hour after hour, day after day. But why? Despite my best efforts to engage the offenders in learning, my results were patchy at best. What might illuminate this grudging (and no doubt, from their viewpoint, generous) acceptance of my presence among their group? The simple answer is because I was the Other (to which

I will return in a moment); but it might be worth a glance at the subject of tolerance in general. In *Violence*, Žižek (2008b) comments interestingly on the topic:

Today's liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive . . . tolerance coincides with its opposite. My duty to be tolerant towards the Other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space. In other words, I should respect his intolerance of my over-proximity. What increasingly emerges as the central human right . . . is the right not to be harassed, which is a right to remain at a safe distance from others.

Yet the "right to remain at a safe distance from others" is a right that has been compromised, from the offenders' point of view, by the very process of having been sentenced and led into a prison; and surely it can only be the offenders whose tolerance this comment might refer to. Who else could "own" this tolerance? It is not my own, surely, regardless of how at risk I frequently felt: I had signed a contract that ensured that I would be paid for my physical presence.

However, Žižek's comments could easily refer to the collective attitude of the offenders and their feelings towards me. For (as I say) I was the Other; I was the intrusive party. It was I who was on their turf ("in their ends", "in their yard"), and as such I was indulged, I was tolerated . . . as long as I refrained from inflicting "harassment" in the form of an attempt at a structured system of education. This is because the offenders—individually and as a group—had succeeded, I believe, in constructing a veneer based on "a gesture of fetishist disavowal" (Žižek, 2008b, p. 45), in which they:

were able somehow to forget—in an act which suspended symbolic efficiency—what had been witnessed. This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowal: "I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know." I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it.

My attempt to "intrude", to emphasise my "overproximity" was a system of reminder. My presence meant that what had happened (the

offence) had really happened, and that there was no escape from it, acts of wilful amnesia notwithstanding.<sup>14</sup>

All of this said, while I maintain ambivalent feelings about my own time working at the prison, I bear a sympathetic thought for those who were not leaving at the end of the office day; and to this extent I can adduce that a prison might qualify as something of a therapeutic space. One way or another, and not necessarily to the degree that anyone would want it to be, it is a therapeutic space. Furthermore, there are questions about prison language itself that should be borne in mind, namely: Who owns the language? Do people who learn the language become conciliatory to this language? Why is language dense? There seems to be an element of the following at the prison: I (the criminal) cannot be forgiven easily so I will try to forget about everything, on the victim's behalf as well as mine. But of course this cannot work; this is fantasy. In Žižek's other volume of 2008, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, it is written: "Freud's famous motto 'what we do not remember, we are compelled to repeat' should thus be turned upside down: what we are unable to repeat, we are haunted by and are compelled to remember. The way to get rid of past trauma is not to remember it, but to fully repeat it" (2008a, p. 321). And do those who use the language do so primarily in order to find a new identity inside the prison?

In this chapter I hope to have given some thoughts on adolescence and the social structures of adolescence, and then some thoughts on the tribulations of being a young offender. I have discussed the practicalities of learning a language inside a prison—not only for the offenders themselves, but also for those who work inside the prison—and I have attempted to show how Freud's structural model of the unconscious is oddly reflective of some of the patterns of speech used by the prisoners, in particular with regard to the discussion of time.

Finally, in the last part of this chapter, I examined the language of the psychic retreat or of the claustrum, drawing also on theories of mourning expounded by Zachary Leader. What I would like to do in closing, however, is ask the reader to reflect on something that a prisoner once told one of his group—his colleagues—the subject being aptly (for psychoanalysis) that of dreams and dreaming. The reference in the first sentence is to the cemetery within the prison walls, long since closed off and inaccessible to most staff, but that used to be employed to bury the dead after they had been hanged on site.

Man use to have dreams about the graveyard at the back exploding and showering us with bits of dead bodies. We're in the exercise yard and deconstructed slices of dead men and women, blood, they're raining all around. They're twitching. They start looking for the rest of their bodies. Never home, never whole . . . just like us, cuz.

### *Postscript*

"Prison Language" is a chapter that was squeezed out of a complicated period of my life, some of the details of which are woven into the text itself. In addition to what the chapter describes, a few additional interpretations might be useful.

Early on in the chapter I make mention of the fact that material (material for observations of a new language *in ovo*) was rich. What I will add to that observation now is that material for other observations was similarly rich. I was able to glimpse a different world from the one in which I had theretofore taken my place. Up till the start of my "sentence" in the Young Offenders' Institution (in 2006) I had enjoyed a number of interesting positions as an educator and/or a writer down the years, but I had never worked in a prison. For some years I had intended to, however, and when the opportunity arose I jumped at it.

One of the first things I remember was how *amusing* the working day could be. One's sense of humour was recalibrated swiftly, in such a way that comments that would have seemed inappropriate or even vile if overheard in a non-prison setting were regarded as witty *bon mots* in the staffroom—or in the classroom. It was inevitable: not only was one grouping with one's immediate colleagues (in a fashion at which Bion's ghost might have nodded approvingly), there was also the sense of "us against them"—a panicked huddle in order to contain anxiety, a "Dunkirk spirit", a means of self-protection—where "they" (the Young Offenders) told most of the same jokes, but where they also had personal experience with which to support their anecdotes. The story (for example) of someone stealing hot chicken at the supermarket deli by stuffing it down his trousers while a co-defendant distracts the sales assistant: such a story might be whimsical in any setting. From a Young Offender's mouth, however, it takes on a different shine, a new life—it is the voice of know-how, the voice of wisdom.

“Institutionalisation” is a word sometimes used to cover this subsuming of one system into another. Institutionalisation is a process of absorption, whereby the originalsc}s psychic organisations and structures of opinion and belief cannot be left unaffected. The person who is institutionalised cannot return to how he was before the changes occurred—a regret that I contemplate in this volume’s final chapter, “The Internet is unwell”. If it were possible to atomise a living person, via a process known mostly to science fiction (notably *Star Trek*), and then coalesce those atoms in a completely different place so that the person was remade in the same appearance, wouldn’t certain laws of physics pertain? After a similar fashion, moving a mind across a boundary like a prison boundary, laws of emotional physics must be observed.

You can never enter the same river twice, as an old adage would have it. Nor can you enter the same Internet twice. In both situations, something about the person and something about the environment will have changed, however small. Exactly the same can be said about a journey through the main gate of a Young Offenders’ Institution.

## Prison Language

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## Chapter Five

# The absence of E

**B**arely thirty years on from the advent of distance learning as we recognise it today, it has already become uncommon for a learner to embark on a programme of education that does not involve frequent access to the Internet; but if a course does not revolve around the Internet, is it in any way inferior and is the learner disadvantaged? Two of the purposes of this chapter are to examine two distance learning programmes, one of which involves Young Offenders serving long sentences, and to explore whether or not learners with restricted Internet access are destined to lose out in an educational setting. In doing so, we also examine learner anxiety and organisational anxieties and the implications for pastoral care.

### *Introduction*

This chapter compares the learning experiences of two sets of learners enrolled on distance learning programmes, one of which has *no* access to the Internet, and one of which has *only* access to the Internet. Is the World Wide Web a necessary tool (a *vital* tool?) for distance learning, or has a certain prophecy—that learning conducted via the Web will

be the future, and the future is now—become self-fulfilling? In other words, can a distance learning programme thrive and succeed without the Internet, or is it the case that because, in the minds of many, “distance learning” actually *equates to* “Internet education”, it is unlikely that a contemporary programme will be able to offer much to a learner who is deprived of a computer?

Furthermore, there are several additional questions that must be posited. To begin in the Socratic fashion, we shall deal briefly with a definition of terms. It should also be borne in the reader’s mind from the beginning that the common thread between the two models of distance learning described herein is your author. In this chapter I draw on personal and professional experience, both positive and negative.

### *What is meant by “distance learning”?*

It will be clear from the preceding paragraph that I do not fall into the category of one who believes that “distance learning” equals “Internet learning”. However, I do believe that there is a confusion of terminologies. While most people might be comfortable enough with the term “distance learning” to denote a programme of study through which a learner sets out to achieve an agreed goal while his/her tutor is not physically present, this same term is sometimes used interchangeably with “e-learning” and “online learning”. At the time of writing, not only is there no fixed and agreed definition for each of these terms that would help us to *distinguish* one of them from the other; and not only do different establishments use these (and other) terms to mean alternative things from other establishments that work in the same sector; it is also the case that definitions in the world of “technology-enhanced learning” mutate swiftly.

For the purposes of this paper, “distance learning” refers to an educational programme in which a tutor is not physically present and in which the learner sends his work away to be assessed. Although the definition produced by Honeyman and Miller (1993) is *nearly two decades old*, it would still seem to hold up nicely: “a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both.” And while we are defining our terms, here are two more. “Online learning” refers to an educational programme that uses the Internet as a primary tool for

learning, but in which a tutor might be physically present. “E-learning” refers to an educational programme that uses *technology* (not necessarily the Internet) as a primary tool for learning. The tutor is often a virtual presence.

### *Groups used in this comparison*

Although the purpose of this chapter is to examine how the Internet (or its absence) affects two separate distance learning programmes, this does not mean that the two groups of learners are otherwise identical in profile. In fact, the two groups are different in additional ways. The first group is made up of Young Offenders, serving long or indeterminate prison sentences. Although the (anonymised) prison is situated in the south-east of England, the prisoners/learners are from all over the British Isles, and two from even further afield (arrested on British soil after failing to smuggle in drugs). They are male, aged between eighteen and twenty-one. For the main part not graduands of a more “traditional” education system, they have enrolled on a variety of distance learning courses for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons revolve around boredom and frustration; some a genuine belief in the curative powers of autodidacticism, self-belief, self-reflection, and self-control. Their reasons for enrolling aside, there are ten young men in the cohort. Four are studying GCSE English; one plumbing; one interior design (an irony that has not failed to escape this young man, who will not be released for another two decades, with good behaviour); one A-level mathematics; one is working through GCSE economics; one an accounting course; and finally, one a counselling course.

The second group of learners is made up of men and women (but mostly women) in a variety of different countries, some in the developing countries of Africa, who are all studying the same Masters course. Their ages range from early twenties to early forties.

Immediately, then, we can see that this comparison is not like with like, for such a comparison would be taxing at best, if not impossible; besides which, it is the variables in any non-scientific study that sometimes produce the most fruitful material. So, while a valid approach might have been to compare the experiences, say, solely of offenders on distance learning programmes, some of whom have access to the

web and some of whom do not, this would not have been either so interesting (in my opinion), or even practical. Very few facilities (in the UK) allow prisoners access to the Internet at all; such access as exists is strictly monitored and can be taken away as a punishment. (Not only is there the risk that offenders will view inappropriate or illegal material, there is also the risk that detailed descriptions of floor plans or photographs of staff/prisoners could be sent to people on the outside.) When it comes to prison education, there is no choice but to rely on what are sometimes regarded elsewhere as somewhat outmoded methods of distance learning—cardboard portfolios of evidence, tutor-marked assignments—because the nearest thing to e-learning offered in many prisons is an IT class where the learner works on word processing or spreadsheets. Perhaps it qualifies as irony, the fact that Internet access in some of the geographically hard-to-reach areas of the world can be considered more stable than the provision in most of the UK's prisons, albeit for a different reason than is usually the case in such a situation.

Furthermore, if my intention had been a more controlled experiment, even if I had been successful and had found a prison with a bona fide Internet-bound distance learning programme, it is highly improbable that the cohort would have fitted the same profile as that of the other, “old-fashioned” prison group; a more precise comparison, therefore, was out of the question.

### *Case study one: the prison*

I used to work as the Skills for Life Co-ordinator at a Young Offenders' Institute. In addition to the responsibilities of this role—managing lecturers, devising a literacy and numeracy programme for offenders who had not passed the equivalent of a Level 1 qualification in each (approximately a D or E grade at GCSE)—I was also responsible for co-ordinating the distance learning provision. Apart from obliging me to undertake a considerable amount of extra paperwork, this addition to my role meant that I held, once a week, a sort of workshop for the learners, who would come to the Education block with their folders and their biros, worried about a looming assignment or an exam. At other times of the week (on an ad hoc basis) I would venture on to the wings in order to speak to learners who were not allowed to mix with

other people, either for reasons of their own safety or for the safety of others. (I was not actually chaperoned during these visits, and on several occasions I felt frightened for my *own* safety.) The purpose of both of these meetings was basically to check how the learners' studies were progressing (if they were progressing), or where the learners had stalled or were in need of assistance. Not that I could have been expected to have had an encyclopaedic overview of all of the topics under scrutiny, of course. Plumbing and interior design proved especially problematic for me, and not only because of the existing manner of unalloyed disdain that the two learners in question held for their new teacher.

The problem being, of course, that I was *not* their teacher, not in the strictest sense of the word. True enough, I was a teacher in other contexts in the prison; but I was not a *distance learning* teacher. By definition alone I could not be! By definition alone, their teachers were elsewhere—they had to be!—and they were awaiting the work that they would mark and send back to me to pass on to the learners. However, the very fact that it was I who passed on the good or bad news for each assignment meant that I was seen, not only as “the teacher”, but also as “the gateway” to a world outside the prison walls of which these learners could merely dream. These Monday morning learners wanted *more* than a general factotum—more than a jack of all educational trades—which is most of what I could offer: they wanted a glimpse of a future built on some form of success and self-realisation. To this extent I had taken on a more or less symbolic role; I had become a semiotic, a totem (and it had happened extremely quickly); or in other words, I had become the leader of Bion's (1961) “dependent group”. A little wryly (or so I believe) Bion writes:

I shall now suggest that all facets of behaviour in the dependent group can be recognized as related if we suppose that in this group power is believed to flow not from science but from magic. One of the characteristics demanded of the leader of the group, then, is that he should either be a magician or behave like one. (p. 84)

But in my case I could neither be one nor behave like one; and I began to feel weakened by the disappointment of these students—disappointment that was, of course, really levelled at themselves, or at their distant teacher—and I certainly, on more than one occasion, wished that

the Internet could be enabled, in order that I could hand some of the onus back to the group. However, the weeks went past, and I was more and more on call to impart such skills as I possessed on the subject of mentoring, power, and boundaries, communication skills, study skills. A jack of all educational trades, as I say, but a master of none.

In Trist and Murray (1990), A. K. Rice writes convincingly of an analogous situation:

As a member of a task group every individual has to take a role and through it control his or her task transactions with colleagues individually and collectively; the leader as a person also has to control his or her own person/role transactions as well as interpersonal relationships with colleagues. In addition to these, a leader has to control transactions between the group and relevant agencies in the environment in the interests of task performance; without such control task performance is impossible. In this role, the role taken by the leader and the boundary control function of the group must have much sentience in common. For the leader, at least, sentient group and task group *must* reinforce each other. So far as task performance is unsatisfactory, by reason either of inadequate resources or of opposing group sentience, transactions with the environment are likely to be difficult and the task sentience of the leader weakened if not destroyed. (pp. 282–283)

On the other hand, would this task group have benefited from a regular access to the Internet? Possibly it would have lent each learner a sense of autonomy, the acquisition of which might have led to a more determined approach; but it is plain to see that it was not the medium of travel that was the problem—it made no difference if the assignment was sent by e-mail or handed to me to put in the post—the problem was *me*. Or more specifically, the problem was whoever happened to be in my shoes, in front of those distance learners once a week. My very presence was a shortcut (or so they believed) to the right answer, or to the right way of researching something; with nobody to guide them, arguably, these learners' experiences would have been more honest and more robust. A human intermediary between the learners and their (numerous and unseen) teachers was a mere *substitute* for the Internet. They already had the papers and materials required; it is my contention that the Internet might even have got in their way and hampered their progress. After all, as is written on the Prisoners' Education Trust website:

Regular monitoring shows that approximately two-thirds of those who get a grant have either completed their course or are continuing with it one year after they started . . . Our bi-annual Effectiveness Survey shows that the vast majority of prisoners are satisfied with their courses and the service that we provide.

So can it even be *surmised* that these learners have been disadvantaged by not having Web access? To conclude this section in the words of the Trust:

Moreover, it would seem that the education in prison can have an impact on re-conviction rates . . . In 2006, the Prisoners' Education Trust submitted the names of 437 prisoners, all of whom had completed a distance learning course funded by the Trust, to the Home Office. Its team of analysts was able to trace records for 377 prisoners and it showed that their reconviction rate was less than one half that of the national average for prisoners two years post release.

### *Case study two: the Masters*

Žižek (2008, p. 274) writes:

When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technically and can be exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when, through TV "live coverage" you can simultaneously "experience" a battle in the Iraqi desert and an opera performance in Beijing; when, in a global digital network, time is nothing but speed, instantaneity; when a winner in a reality show counts as the great man of the people; then, yes, still looming like a spectre over all this uproar are the questions, What is it for? Where are we going? What is to be done?

Of course, Žižek is but one of technology's interrogators (as he is an interrogator of many ideologies, modalities, and contemporaneities; in fact, it is probably a simple matter of time before he tackles online learning directly). Possibly "distance learning" is an answer to the first of Žižek's three questions; it might even go some way to responding to number two as well. There is no doubt that technology enhanced learning can assist *some learners* and empower them to take



control of their educational vehicle. Nor, of course, is the learner the only party to benefit: distance learning is a boon to the organisation too, or potentially so at any rate. By using an online distance learning programme, there are opportunities to make money from emerging markets and to meet the demands from marketplaces on a global scale, while accentuating the flexibility of the delivery.

These factors in mind, there was a branching out into the world of a Masters programme. (My role in this development is that of Learning Technologist.) Simultaneously (and perhaps controversially), it might be argued that a wholly online distance learning programme marries the modish comprehension that people (I repeat: some learners) can learn via aural and visual reception—such as streamed audio and video—with Skinner's work of the 1950s on programmed instruction, behavioural objectives, and the breaking of instructional content into small units followed by the early praising of correct responses. In planning this Masters, one question that was borne in mind was as follows: Is human interaction essential or will technology and the virtual environment suffice? We were aware that Kevern and Webb (2004) had identified that some mature students lack coping strategies and support systems for effectively managing both the workload of a taught course and their domestic role, which added further support for the need to develop and offer a flexible and family-friendly system of studying. Therefore (with a nod towards the ironic), there was a tension from the conception stages that the Internet could not possibly live up to our or our students' (unvoiced) expectations; but, as Yorke (2003) argued, one of the key purposes of Higher Education is to facilitate the autonomy of learners—and the hope was that an Internet resource would see to this (which in time it has). Throughout the process, the affirmations of (inter alia) Gibbs (2000)—the suggestion that subjects have been brought alive by distance learners in the way they use the new technology—has been uppermost.

The process of communication between lecturer and student can be improved by distance learning, Gibbs argues. The teacher considers an evaluative or critical response more carefully, and believes that a student should be self-empowered to take charge of his/her own learning at Masters level. Balanced against such views are complaints about technology not being fully up to the task of a 100% online programme. Quite possibly there is an element of truth in both tangential viewpoints: certainly the requisite technology is a changing

agent. But so are the learners themselves. Can it ever be ensured that learners will be engaged, without their yearning for human contact? Perhaps in this case, given the remote geographical isolation in which many of our learners lived, we could assume a certain “natural” acclimatisation to the challenges peculiar to distance learning; or at the very least, perhaps a willingness to adjust to them might be supposed.

In fact, there are very few entities less predictable than a learner, and very little can ever be assumed. The learners have required a good deal of online support (not to mention an effective communications infrastructure, which has not always proved effective at all). In this respect, of course, they have benefited from the Internet: they have certainly received more hours of *dedicated* support than the prisoners did, via me, from *their* teachers. But there is also a sense in which, in keeping with the prison distance learning, a sense of over-dependency on the educational representative can originate.

For example, in a cohort of approximately the same size as that of the Young Offenders’ Institute, there have been:

- Persistent anxieties expressed (by learners) about their individual progress.
- Learners’ health care issues (e.g., learners with HIV in parts of Africa; a learner with meningitis who spent five weeks in hospital; a learner who fell down stairs, broke both wrists, tore a ligament in one ankle, and developed a hairline fracture in other).
- Dyslexia issues (interestingly, much less likely to be admitted to than HIV issues).
- Bipolar disorder issues.
- “Social” factors (e.g., expectations placed on the learner at home; a learner doing medical work in a village that was attacked by marauders who murdered nearly everyone in the village; a learner in Europe whose father was paralysed in a failed assassination attempt, although he died later).
- Other issues and problems connected to places of high political and insurgent volatility.

Has a distance learning programme succeeded if it cannot claim to have offered relevant pastoral support for learners who fall into any of these brackets (not to mention a dozen others)? Should a distance learning programme plan the pastoral role that is sometimes required by students? While working at the prison I was able to contain such

issues, were they ever to arise, but it might be argued that the Internet, while providing a safe and (largely) efficient mode of delivery, paradoxically *creates* further challenges by making feedback too easy and embedding a certain (over?) sensitivity to students' needs. The broad question, in a nutshell, might be: Where does the pastoral role fit in with the role of the distance learning lecturer? A paper on this subject is forthcoming. And is there enough psychology taught on teacher training programmes? Do we need to be better aware about the links between pedagogy and the containment of learner anxiety?

### *Reflections*

As discussed, the most unpredictable factor in most dynamics is arguably the human being. A piece of technology might well let us down, but in general it will work or it will not work. A human being on a distance learning course is infinitely more variable. Obholzer (1994) writes: "The debate about which nation has the best education system could be seen as a debate about who will survive and who will end up against the wall . . . Institutions often serve as containers for the unwanted or difficult-to-cope with aspects of ourselves" (p. 172).

Obholzer (a teacher/trainer himself) is convincing in his assertion that workplaces are containers for elements of anxiety, and in his implication that we might draw something analogous from our work with learners. There is absolutely no doubt that while working in the prison, I was subjected to the transmission of negative feelings (from the learners) that *might* have been dissipated more effectively via the Internet, if this option had been available. Anxiety about assignments and exams, though directed primarily at the learners' respective tutors, were projected on to (and into) me, thanks to the absence of "E"—the absence of an online provision. But it could have been worse, of course. Lynn Greenwood, in "The ultimate container" (Saunders, 2001), writes: "My role is a strange one: I am and am not part of the prison system; one of the challenges I face is to build up enough trust with my patients to overcome their suspicion of my ambiguous role" (p. 41). Granted, Greenwood's subject is psychotherapy and not teaching per se, but in the elements of hostility-containment, confession-hearing, bravado-bearing, and fear-disguise, I do believe that there are unavoidable comparisons; and I share the author's perceptions.

By quoting another psychotherapist, Caecilia Taylor, Greenwood takes the theme a little further:

Therapy with a murderer can at times feel like one is treading on eggshells: the relationship the patient developed towards me was often heavily loaded with the feelings he had had, albeit mostly unconsciously, towards his mother and father. At times, I was frankly afraid that by saying the wrong thing, I might trigger re-enactment right there and then, and I myself might be the victim of his murderous rage. (Taylor, 1997, p.108)

Perhaps an Internet conduit of some description might have helped to contain the learners' anxieties, and by doing so, have improved the overall learning experience; just as likely, however, it would have complicated matters. Having "shared" their anxieties with me (to such an extent that when I returned from a period of illness, I was greeted with an extremely angry Monday morning class that had been obliged to study totally alone for the previous few weeks, thereby building up individual stores of hatred and fear. And who can really blame these learners for the way they felt (and feel)? The following is part of a male prisoner's diary, quoted by Norval Morris in an article entitled "[The contemporary prison](#)" (1995): "A bell rang loudly in F House, followed by the loudspeaker blaring, 'School, barbershop, library . . . get ready for work.' . . . It was the usual rush to nowhere" (p. 206). Two pages later, this same prisoner is reflecting on his (in-house) course, and writes: "In the distant years when I am free I may be able to use what I am learning about computer programming, but I doubt it; the point is that it helps to keep me alive" (p. 208). And there is, of course, the matter that this gobbet mentions to address more fully: the matter of learner depression. The prisoner concludes: "I hope this diary is of use to you; it fails to capture the constant unhappiness of prison life and the constant sense of danger—you are never for a moment happy, except briefly on visitors [*sic*] days, and that is a bitter happiness . . . it misses the consuming stupidity of living this way . . . purposes are unclear, education is largely a token, idleness takes the place of work and industry, and keeping peace and safety between prisoner and prisoner is the prevailing aim" (p. 211).

Granted, this particular prisoner is not on a *distance* learning programme, but his experiences help to make us recognise that the

prison, *and the distance learning*, served a vital role in forcing prisoners to confront a reality that, although unpleasant, would at least necessitate a shift from the psychoanalytical paranoid-schizoid position to one of the depressive position. In the words of Obholzer (1994) once more, an institution

deals constantly with fundamental human anxieties about life and death, or, in more psychoanalytic terms, about annihilation . . . the individual who is prey to these primitive anxieties seeks relief by projecting these anxieties onto another . . . in such a way that the feelings become bearable; we then say the anxieties have become “contained”. It is this process of containment that eventually makes possible the maturational shift from the paranoid-schizoid position, which involves fragmentation and denial of reality, to the depressive position, where integration, thought and appropriate responses to reality are possible. In an analogous way, the institutions referred to above serve to contain these anxieties for society as a whole. (p. 170)

My contention is that this particular prison group suffered nothing (or very little) through the absence of an online delivery. Quite the contrary: the set up helped the prisoners channel anger that might have been spilt harmfully over the World Wide Web. The only person, arguably, to be damaged was the one paid to be there in the first place . . . and perhaps—unconsciously—he was asking for it!

### *Concluding comments*

With the Masters programme, the tasks for the learner to achieve are far broader and more challenging; and of course the Internet, in this case, may be used as a tool for research. Without it, simply, these learners would not have been able to appear on this specific programme. The Internet has not so much enabled learning (a Devil’s advocate might counter) as enabled *access*. While this is not the case for this specific Masters, it is easy to see how a bad learning programme, one which offers no room for the learner to “breathe” and to become the controller of his or her own education, could be thus delineated. On such a programme the presence of the Internet is no more than a key to the garden (to coin a metaphor); but the Internet could *also* be the key to the shed where one keeps all of the gardening

tools. Sure, you can admire a garden and *do nothing*; but if you take the tools from the shed, and use them to work, the garden becomes your own. It becomes something in which to plant your pride.

By way of doing something to “evaluate” these two distance learning programmes, I have employed some of the skills of narrative reflection in order to describe the sequence of events using a cognitive framework which enables decoding (Chandler 2007). But it remains the case that much of this paper must be sensory—instinctive even. And as I have moved through, certain questions have played around and around in mind, on a loop. Does the Internet come equipped with a “soothing” factor? Does it help us to “relax” into our studies, as if it were like a drug? Is it easier or more acceptable to make a mistake while on the Internet (just delete and re-try; none of that tiresome work on the scary-to-some sheet of white paper). My view is that it is certainly easy to be *lazy* on the Internet, if you are not guided properly by a competent distance learning facilitator; but equally, chaperoned and helped by the right hands, the learner may find a rewarding, enriching educational experience that builds and consolidates, and which enables him/her to engage in social learning and simply *social* activities to which he/she would have had neither access nor even recourse while on the equivalent of the prison distance learning programme.

As I stated at the beginning, the comparison was never meant to be like with like. What I hope is that I have been able to delineate some of the quirks and anomalies inherent in these programmes. All the time it must be kept in mind that it is learners who make the programme, every bit as much as vice versa. Distance learners come with issues, but they will not be the same issues from programme to programme, of course, and they cannot be prepared for. This is among the reasons why it should not be stated defiantly that one programme is “better” than another—in truth, if we are considering the learner experience, not even the exam data is a fair indication of the same.



## The Absence of E

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## CHAPTER NINE

## From fatigue to anxiety

This chapter argues that as educators moving into a Web 2.0 world, we are likely to experience anxiety. Not only is this anxiety understandable, it is a healthy response to a perception of an older (and worn out) version of the Internet that is all that we have known up to now. However, one argument might be that Web 2.0 is more than a *tool* for the beginnings of the future of education: it is also, *in and of itself*, the beginnings of the future of education. It is not only the tool to use, it is something that needs to be understood better itself. Web 1 must be retired. This is one of the ways that a dynamic evolves: the disuse of one model is replaced by the (temporary) overuse of the next model. This chapter contends that successful educational Web 2.0 will require more balance and pedagogic poise than was shown throughout some of the early days of online education. It will not involve flashing everything all at once, for such an approach can only lead to Internet fatigue (and learner boredom). Web 2.0 is about learning from the learner. What part of the new structure is appreciated? What part is ignored? Why do these things happen? What role does the educator play in his own developmental learning of the tools of his trade? And how does this inform his preparations for the learners' experiences? For my argument I rely on recent successes with the

commissioners for two online courses at the university. Both of these commissioners were anxious education developers, but have come around to a way of thinking that includes the potential of web-based learning (at its most up-to-date).

### *Introduction*

What are the implications for educators in a Web 2.0 existence? Unless we tack on a caveat that says something like "... in twenty years' time", a prediction of the future of online learning is likely to be weighted in a conservative, staid manner. We are realists. Despite the fact that our burgeoning field is more fruitful than ever; despite the fact that many of our occupations did not *exist* two decades ago—or even one decade ago—and despite the fact that occupations have been made redundant to create our posts, when contemplating the future of online learning we are apt to keep our feet on the ground. We do not lose our heads, with ambition being one thing, dreamy optimism quite another. But when we reflect on the achievements to date, if we have pause for thought, why do we not think big or bigger? Quite possibly any sense of self-restraint (posing as pragmatism) is a conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of our current restrictions. For example, as yet we do *not* have infinite bandwidth; we do *not* have instantaneous synchronous facilities for groupwork for learners in every time zone; we do *not* have cranial receptor accessories; so we tend to predict based on a Web 1 mentality, and err somewhat on the side of caution—for fear of appearing foolish or naïve. Furthermore, the unknown can seem scary.

### *Growth*

Despite the sense of anxiety that might be instigated—"fear with a definable content", in the words of Juutinen and Saariluoma (2010)—we should probably regard the near future and its implications for educational design in a Web 2.0 world. Within the online learning industry, very few practitioners would argue with the consensus view that growth is one of its few certainties. How we understand the concept of growth, on the other hand, is open to any number of interpretations; and when contemplating the likely characteristics of the future of

online learning, commentators are likely to fall into one of several camps. Commentators such as Nagel (2010) might emphasise the fiscal and financial spurts that the industry is likely to experience; whereas Bates (2011) is keen to promote the idea that online learning will replace more traditional modes of delivery, irrespective of concerns that technology is often not employed to a high standard. Chiming nicely with Bates's views, Downes writes:

While technology changes rapidly, people do not. People want to use tools that look and feel like tools they've always used, and will tend to adopt tools only if they see a clear benefit either in productivity or in savings. (2008)

With the above views in mind, it might be useful to explore an extrapolation that has not been addressed in much detail up to now. At the same time, Milligan (2006) was perhaps slightly ahead of his time with the notion of the PLE—the Personalised Learning Environment—but the prescience of his conclusions is obviously bearing fruit as our industry develops and as more emphasis is placed on the learner's ways of communicating and creating. Finally, we should probably not go any further into a discussion of online learning growth without mentioning the hardware that we will probably require: is it not predictable that a growth in the industry will be accompanied by a paradoxical reduction in the size of the necessary equipment?

The physical dimensions of pieces of hardware will not mark the end of the paradoxes in the years to come, of course. The fact that we are transitioning from what will be seen as the "early days" of online learning (and have yet to get it quite right), to a more "confident" stance as we gaze into the future, is sure to instigate anxieties for both educators and learners. Arguably, we are moving away from a somewhat worn-out opening foray into online learning—along with its implications of Internet fatigue (Horrigan, 2009)—to a future that seems bright with pedagogic possibilities, so bright in fact that it makes us somewhat uneasy not to be able to see clearly in the dazzle. In other words, we might argue that the movement is from a sense of (comfortable) fatigue with the current tools of our trade, to a desire that is divided in two: a desire to view the future of online learning as being reliant on the next tool (which will resemble the existing tool); and a desire to peek into a future that is only embryonic and not *in situ*.

### *Anxiety*

Anxiety is a natural and unavoidable reaction to a perception of danger or risk. In the context that we are exploring, anxiety is not only understandable, it is a healthy response to the loss of an “old” Web 1, complete with its quirks and its sensibilities, and the emergence of a way of learner engagement that remains new to some educators and at least fresh to others who have been employing the Web 2.0 technologies (such as they are as yet) for some time. In fact, we might add that it is not *anxiety* that is unhealthy; it is the fact that an awareness of the new horizons of online learning is not rife, that is unhealthy. Along with the perception of an increase in workload, the anxiety for many educators is that technology itself needs to be mastered before we can educate our learners to the standards that we would wish to offer. But are either of these perceptions fair? Certainly if we accept the existence of online learning as an ongoing concept, however, we must also consider the developments inherent. For example, if you were to type “the future of online learning” into any search engine, you would be likely to receive in excess of *fifty million* hits. Type “the future of cheating in online learning” and you still get 500,000! If we are going to consider our learners of the future, we must of course consider all the exciting new ways in which they might cheat!

What is it about the prospects of a Web 2.0 sphere of learning that promotes such consternation and distress among staff and learners? It is natural to be wary of the unknown, of course, but as far back as 1998, Jaffee (among others) was writing about institutional resistances to new technologies, particularly asynchronous learning networks. At what point do we become used to a so-called “new” system? Should we not have emerged from such a fight-or-flight mindset by now? Even if we should have, it has not happened. The issues revolving around design, administration, and the decision-making processes that feed into a new programme that were reported by [Maggiuka and colleagues \(2005\)](#) are as relevant today, perhaps more so. Our ongoing anxiety about online learning gives the lie to the notion that ours is an industry in which change occurs rapidly and frequently. Indeed, it might easily be argued that the opposite is true; and if the latter is the case, perhaps people want to stay frightened. Naturally this leaves us with something of a muddled picture, in which “higher education faculties are responding slowly, or even resisting, the non-traditional

instructional models innate to distance education” (Mills et al., 2009, p. 19), but in which learners “expect institutions of higher education to *keep pace with their skills and interests*” (p.20, italics added).

This last point is crucial. Even more so than they ever were, learners are now in a position to insist that their needs are met; to demand, in a sense, the full quality control of their individual Personalised Learning Environments. As practitioners we should be in a position to want to help them to achieve—rather than reacting to edicts from above about the future of education being online distance learning, whether you like it or not—and surely the nettle is ours to grasp. Losing our amnesia would be a good way to begin to do so. Buckling under the weight of deadlines, marking, meetings, and tutorials, it has become the simplest choice to “forget”—to engage in a wilful act of paramnesiac blindness—that learners often march one by one, not group by group.

When something enters our experience that is unknown, our brains might secrete adrenalin, dopamine, and a host of other enzymes, and we are squarely in a fight-or-flight mode; but this is a reaction to a perceived stripping-away of control (or self-control). Until we determine what the unknown quality is, and how we can deal with it, we cannot control it (or ourselves). We try to control what we are exposed to, thereby reducing the number of surprises, and dosing ourselves to a comfortable numbness with the self-medicative qualities of Web 1. Many learners, however, may feel differently. For many learners the unknown quality is a life *before* the Internet: anxiety is boredom itself, and vice versa. To this extent, control is theirs.

### *A university's examples*

An institution for Higher Education in the south-east of England is leading the way locally with its dedication to Mode 3 Learning: programmes that either are or will be delivered entirely online. For this university the implementation of Mode 3 marks a development on from two possibilities:

- A face-to-face programme.
- A blended learning programme.

Developing an online learning package from either original source is problematic, and neither source makes for an easier transition than the other, with both of them bringing their own specific challenges and areas of frustration (Mathew 2011, Sapsed & Mathew 2011). However, educator engagement and enthusiasm may prove the best possible spur to invention; and it is worth reviewing briefly two new courses offered by the university, by way of illustration of the same.

The courses are both located within the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, and by coincidence the leaders of both courses approached the relevant department with the query of how the existing programmes might be “turned into” fully online Mode 3 deliveries. The discussion took place that one is not “turned into” the other (except in rare circumstances); instead work must be re-contextualised, repackaged, and often rewritten. It is not so much a case of redeployment as re-creation.

The leaders of both courses, although initially anxious about the (somewhat unexpected) workload that would be required, were keen to pursue the idea of re-creating the existing face-to-face delivery into an online package. Coincidentally, not only do both courses appeal to members of the Health Care profession, and not only were we commissioned by them at the same time; it is also the case that both courses already had compulsory attendance days and an emphasis on continuing professional development, with the completion of each course leading to fifteen UK credits. (A fifteen-credit programme would be equal to approximately 150 hours of work in total.) In preparation for this paper, the author asked the course leaders five quick questions on the subject of their involvement with online learning to date. The responses are below. The questions were:

1. You are moving from a face-to-face delivery to an online delivery of your programme. When you first thought about this, how did you feel about the idea?
2. Why do you think you felt this way?
3. Have your feelings changed since the project started?
4. How do you feel about online learning/your project online now?
5. What would be a perfect future for your programme?

At a later date these interviews will be built upon, as this work will be monitored over the next few years.

*Course One: RTPP*

The first course to look at is the Return to Professional Practice course, which prepares qualified staff to return to nursing following a career break. This course is a mandatory requirement that has been set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, and it appeals largely to practitioners who have a lapsed registration (although practitioners with live registration may also undertake the course). It is a part-time course that has always required a set number of days of physical appearance in a classroom (forty hours in total) along with written pieces and reflective writing by way of a summative assessment. The course also enables practitioners to experience practice in a health care setting agreed between them and a supporting practice provider; furthermore, the student focuses on health and social trends and professional issues relevant to their professional background.

The course leader's answers were as follows:

As I had had the thought about doing the RTP by distance learning, I was quite excited about the prospect, although I was concerned about the actual development of the pack. As well as other issues which are addressed in other questions.

I had wanted to change the RTP for a number of reasons, but I was unsure if it would be possible to go down this route within University Regulations. I was also worried that I did not have enough IT skills to do the packs, and also how to provide the material. I did not want to go down the old OU route.<sup>34</sup>

Some of my anxieties have gone, and I really had no idea how the project could mushroom. I am still very excited about it. I also feel very supported in the development of the packages.

I feel that there is potential for so much on-line learning. I was so pleased to see the first package functioning, and was amazed at how it was "presented".

I would like it to continue to grow, which would open up possibilities for many more RTP students.

*Course Two: MSPP*

The Mentorship and Support for Professional Practice course is delivered in a number of local settings and brings together three key elements within the role of mentor in a health care environment:



- student support and supervision
- practice assessment
- the facilitation of learning.

The Department of Health and the Nursing and Midwifery Council expect programmes of study that address head on the nature of learning in practice. This course promotes an enhanced understanding of the skills and attitudes that are needed to support pre-registration health and social care students. The learner is required to complete written work in partnership with a mentor, having identified a learner's needs, to work on a learning programme for the same learner, and to write an evaluation of the role of the mentor.

The course leader's replies were as follows:

When it was first mentioned to me (e-learning) I was extremely anxious, but at the same time keen to go along with it.

I was anxious as I believe I'm a real novice with any form of technology but I was keen to go ahead as I could see that blended learning would suit a lot of my students and also make it easier for practice (in terms of not having to release them from heavy workloads in the Trust on so many occasions, e-learning having replaced two contact days).

My feelings of anxiety have changed as it has become obvious that you are prepared to help and teach me what I need to know.

I am still a little anxious about monitoring groups through the e-learning site, but I think you will support me in this (hope so anyway). I am really pleased that you are going to site the e-learning on the Blackboard site with the added bonus that you have offered to help me clean this site up.

This MSPP is becoming more practically based as some students will be studying on a non accredited basis, therefore I would like to increase the e-learning content (eventually) and hopefully also have some material for the mentors of these students. I would like to link all my mentorship sites (MSPP & Mentor site) so that this e-learning in the form of quizzes would be available to more practitioners/mentors.

### *What do the learners say?*

Thus far in this chapter we have mostly mentioned anxiety in the context of implications for new course designers, but let us not run

away with the impression that learners are all “Digital Natives” (Prensky, 2001) and fully conversant with all manners and modes of our industry. This is simply not the case. Distance learners, by definition, will be found in some of the areas of the world that struggle to maintain an Internet connection, let alone a fully up-to-date awareness of Web novelties and ephemera. “All our experiences in relation to students using the LMS pointed towards the existence of anxiety that varied in type and in level across the group,” write Saadé and Kira (2009) in their ground-breaking study of learner anxieties. They continue: “Motivated to gain insight into the students’ perceptions of the LMS and document those experiences, we decided to study anxiety as it relates to computer self-efficacy and perceptions.” As part of the follow-up to this chapter I hope to conduct research on our learners’ anxieties, particularly given the fact that the learners on both the Return to Professional Practice and the Mentorship courses are not traditionally confident users of computers or of the Internet. For these learners (and others) it is fair to say that they have not arrived via a traditional academic background (with occasional exceptions). It will be interesting to gather their thoughts as the online work continues.

Learner anxiety might also be a gauge of quality of performance (albeit not always a wholly reliable one). A learner who goes into an exam with no worries at all will frequently feel that he or she has underperformed afterwards; and it would appear that a small amount of short term anxiety as one enters a situation might improve one’s performance and even be evolutionarily advantageous (Myers, 2007). With Web 2.0 we have the opportunity of providing, in a totally positive manner, a fully functioning anxiety-inspiring experience for our learners. Perhaps this will be achieved by acknowledging that anxiety is an addiction or condition best shared: in this case, perhaps, shared among their peers but also shared with their educators. Web 2.0 is more than a tool for the beginnings of the future of education. It is also, *in and of itself*, the beginnings of the future of education: its opportunities, as we rethink our way away from a model of “text + assessment + consolidation + text . . .” ad nauseum (which we should not have been doing in this industry anyway for the past decade) we might allow ourselves the luxury of *embracing* the new technologies and the pedagogic potentials therein. Web 2.0 is not just the next thing, nor is it merely the tool to use, it is something which needs to

be understood better itself. Or in other words, it needs to be understood better by us, the educators.

It is the very least that our learners will demand.

### *Concluding remarks*

Taking into consideration the money that circulates around the arteries of this industry, it is foolish to assume anything other than a rude future for online education. As we gratefully retire Web 1, and thank it for its years of dedicated (if sporadically reliable) service, we welcome in the new. This is one of the ways that a dynamic evolves, after all: the disuse of one model is replaced by the (temporary) overuse of the next model; and we are likely to see our educators “trying too hard” with all of the new tools at their disposal. And yet this is one of the ways that we will all learn. Perhaps the educational protocols of Web 2.0 will require more balance and pedagogic poise than was shown throughout some of the early days of online education, when the tools seemed sometimes more important than the educational activities to which they referred.

Let us hope that we have learned from our own past as educators too. Web 2.0 should not involve using every tool in the box as flashily and gaudily as possible, or all at once. We must listen to our learners and take in the knowledge of what they are telling us—even if we have to intuit some of the less spoken messages! We do not want to lead our learners to another iteration of Internet fatigue (and learner boredom) in a few years’ time. A good model might be to use our wikis and discussion boards (for example) with enthusiasm, but not to place all of our faith in these tools alone. Assume nothing, or at least little; and be prepared to alter our strategies, in precisely the same way that we would in a classroom setting. If X is not working, try Y.

The new generation of web tools will give educators this kind of pioneering freedom, not to mention the chance to learn—really learn—from the learner. Accompanying our course evaluations about what part of the new structure was appreciated by the learner and what part was ignored, about why these things happen and what we do about it later, we have been given the opportunity to play a part in *our own* developmental learning of the tools of our trade. Will this inform our preparations for the learners’ experiences? It is a chance to.

## From Fatigue to Anxiety

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## Chapter Seven

# Cyber tools and virtual weapons

Consider the following situation, if you will. A secret committee has been formed in order to ensure the continuation of a particular movement. This movement is led by a man whose name and ideas are well known, although many do not agree with what he professes. The committee has been set up by one of this controversial speaker's most loyal supporters, a man whose ambition was to form a Praetorian guard around the Well-Known Man and to monitor the behaviour of a younger member who is suspected of harbouring opinions contradictory to those of the Well-Known Man. The other aim of the committee is to preserve the purity of the group's central tenets, as decided by the Well-Known Man.

Perhaps this sounds like the inner workings of a cult (and perhaps you will still believe this to be true, even when you know the identities of the key players). As it happens, the Well-Known Man was Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis. His loyal supporter was Ernest Jones, and the man under scrutiny was none other than Carl Jung. The year was 1912. In an atmosphere of cronyism, idolatry, and suspicion, Freud enthusiastically embraced the very notion of secrecy, and membership was tightly controlled: indeed, hagiographic agreement with Freud's ideas seems to have been the only ticket

accepted for admission into the society. Rejection of his theses was tantamount to betrayal; and a perceived personal rejection of Freud was sufficient to have someone branded as an enemy.

If such a set-up already bears the markings of a form of conditioning, and if the clear inference is that this was bound to end badly, then the demise of this secret committee also wears a certain badge of irony. For all of its shady machinations and pseudo-aggressive inclusivity, the committee imploded because—and this is the ironic touch—the members did not actually like each other very much. In the words of Phyllis Grosskurth (1991, p. 195), “fantasy had been dissolved by the harsh reality of human beings unable to get along together”.

One hundred years before the advent of what we now call social media, the anecdote of Freud’s Inner Circle gives an example of what we now take for granted, from a contemporary point of view. The scurrility, the changing of political affections, the fluctuations and oscillations of comradeship, the bullying: all of these, surely, represent social media’s potential at its dangerous worst. In one way, therefore, we might even argue that the principles behind social media (good and bad) are in fact nothing new. Granted, the tools have been updated but the resentments and cooling affiliations are as old as the human story itself.

Alternatively, consider a separate scenario.

The date is 2002, the place Baltimore, USA. The American crime show *The Wire* premiered on 2 June of that year, and it was set in the Maryland city. In addition to its interweaving plot-lines about drugs and politics, brutality and betrayal, its intermingling of dense and slangy Baltimore Police speech and felon argot, and its blurring of professional boundaries, one of its main stories concerned the telephone tapping of a network of payphones used by criminals going about their narcotics business. By listening in to the heavily encoded conversations, the police are able to make connections and arrests: the *Wire* of the title can mean many things in different contexts.

Watching this series now (and please bear in mind that we are only discussing a passing of time of little more than a decade), it is obvious that this is a crime drama that was born before social media had made much noise or had gathered much attention to itself. How much easier it would have been to catch those dealers if they had only had Facebook to use instead of payphones!

Or perhaps the best illustration is one in which the author relays his own reflections on a news story that seems, even now, two years on (at time of writing) scarcely believable. I refer to the UK riots of 2011, news of which certainly made an appearance on Italian TV, where I happened to be at a conference at the time. And as we began this observation of several vignettes with a reference to Sigmund Freud, I would like to show the riots through the lens of one of his most famous theories, if I may: the theory outlined in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921c).

This was Freud's second essay (after *Totem and Taboo* in 1913) on the subject of collective psychology. He submitted that individual and social psychology are more or less identical, and he asked us to question the emotional bonds that hold collective entities together. "The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly," he argues, "but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt." In other words, the group ideal is what we sacrifice our individuality to, on occasion.

Nowadays—in the west at least—in the absence of public executions, freak shows, or the exhibition of beheaded traitors (with their hair combed nicely and their faces washed for easier audience recognition, as a warning), it is perhaps to the world of crime in general that we might turn for a clear example of Freud's theories on group psychology in action. More specifically, we might turn to the phenomenon of the riot. In the summer of 2011, England saw a series of city riots that re-confirmed much of what Freud taught us in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and was all the more surprising for its intensity and faux-sporadic nature. What happened? Aside from the customary pollutants, what was in the English urban air during those weeks? That technology was used, both to coordinate and choreograph events (using mobile phones, networking sites, Twitter), and to stay one step ahead of the police, is now established; but how did the riots grip the public's imagination so powerfully, to such an extent that among the rioters were practitioners of professions such as teaching?

As an Englishman, I have long since become used to the violent behaviour of my countrymen. I have witnessed, via the television, mob aggression sparked (say) by an unsuccessful football match result, especially abroad; I have witnessed racist scraps, student protests,



political skirmishes. This felt different. It was the inclusivity of the recent riots that made the UK (and Europe) sit up and think: it was not so much every man for himself, as: every man join the hive mind. The rioters were not of one race, one class, or one political party; nor were they of one age group, one gender, or one ideological opinion. In fact, one of the defining features of this particular string of riots was its lack of defining features. Come one, come all, was the unspoken battle cry; and England rallied to the call as if it was what it had been waiting for, all of its life. The city streets did not know what had hit them.

Social media-augmented political action was what had hit them (or so it was claimed); and the self-justification of political intent, however retrospectively it is made, is a frequent companion of those who would organise such attacks. (These attacks, let us remember, were not only on the forces of law and order, but were also on bystanders and innocent shop-owners.) And while we might argue that the British riot is not exactly new, we can balance this by saying that it is at least fairly uncommon, and that social media had aided the orchestration and execution. However, it is not true to claim that violence is impossible without social media. Of course not: in the past, riots managed perfectly well without social media to help them along. But via the use of cyber tools and virtual weapons, we can look again at the two component words of social media and remember that while media remains “a means of communication”, the original definition of social has corrupted over centuries. Where once, in the early sixteenth century for example, it was defined as “characterized by friendliness or geniality” (from the Middle French social (14th-c.) and from the Latin *socialis*, “united, living with others”), social also means grouped by means of antagonism or anxiety. Or in other words, what Freud surmised in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (and what he failed to predict in the example of the secret committee) was that an individual’s awareness of, and adherence to, the unconscious wishes of the group cannot last forever. Sooner or later, an individual’s sense of anxiety is impossible to ignore.

For the moment, however, let us stay in the hive mind. As a result of the summer of 2011, opinions on the subject of rioting seem to have been altered, however temporarily. This is because, for the vast majority of people in England, home is (was?) a safe place to live, and outbursts of such violence had been shocking, newsworthy, but rare—largely the work of *homo urbanis* of a lower social order. This can no

longer be the case. Suddenly, in the space of days, this view had to be challenged and qualified: London had “erupted”, and other cities followed suit: other cities wanted a piece of the action. Why might this have been the case? Bearing in mind the presence of social media as a means of translating solitary thought into something that the Group Mind will understand and allow one to “think”; and bearing in mind the political structures—perceived repression, for example—that could have led to bad feelings in the first place, structured chaos and unstructured violence had become a social adhesive.

In *Group Psychology*, Freud tells us:

A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association . . . The feelings of a group are always very simple and very exaggerated. So that a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty. (1921c, p. 78)

If we take Freud at his word on this point (and nothing among the news coverage would seem to contradict him), then we might view the violent group mind as something of a paradox. It is undeniably violent in order to achieve its group-goals, but we might also argue that its basic simplicity of mission is also self-protective. The crowd threatens before it has a chance to be threatened . . . even if there is no counterweighted force levelled against it. This is politics in action.

As Freud continues: “It respects force and can only be slightly influenced by kindness, which it regards merely as a form of weakness. What it demands of its heroes is strength, or even violence. It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters” (1921c). Or as Will Self (2011) would have it: “The dominant trait of the crowd is to reduce its myriad individuals to a single, dysfunctional persona. The crowd is stupider than the averaging of its component minds.” Parenthetically we might add that the groups followed (unconsciously, of course) some of Freud’s reasoning in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), especially with reference to not loving one’s neighbour in the group . . . or even trusting him!

More and more, the effects of psychoanalysis and the more insidious traits of social media sound similar. Even the vigorous expansion of the former discipline in Freud’s own lifetime (as it spread within medicine, especially in the US, and to other forms of therapy, to

literature, art, popular culture, and the social sciences,) and the rash-like multiplication of social media in our own times are broadly analogous. Furthermore, the robust and belligerent criticisms aimed at both—by their more splenetic detractors—can be viewed as similar. And why did psychoanalysis attract such waves of bad feeling? Why do some people view social media as a pervasive threat? Arguably, because we are hardwired to be anxious of change. Anxiety is a sensation of unease that is caused by a prediction (often made on an unconscious level) of something bad that is about to happen; and it is plain to see why it has been a subject much covered in psychoanalysis. For some users, the Internet itself is overwhelming—a vast, amorphous entity, filled with stressors and unseen menace that recalls the big Other of one of Freud's followers, Jacques Lacan. In the words of Dylan Evans (in turn, one of Lacan's followers):

The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. Indeed, the big Other is the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. The Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject. (Evans, 1996, p. 133)

The Other is watching us while we work; again on an unconscious level, the Other is Facebook, the Other is the very technology that we use and in which we swim or flail (depending on one's point of view). If it is true that it is natural to feel anxious about change, then it is also fair to feel anxious about the fact that we cannot see the end of the changes that have been imposed upon us.

But what of social media's more positive aspects? If an impression has been formed that the implications of the rapid swelling of social media are entirely negative (socially, personally, epiphenomenalistically or politically negative), let us look at some different anecdotal evidence. After all, we might well agree that the Internet is rather like a river: it is impossible to step into it twice and to find it exactly the same on both occasions. Surely the same can be said of social media itself: that it will change; that it can be used as a force for societal good. Not only are the tools used for social media constantly developing,

social media itself—as a political space, a learning space, perhaps—is also developing and thereby affecting the way that it is used. To risk over-straining my own metaphor, we have crossed the river several times now, and the previously unexplored country on the other side is more familiar to us with every visit. We have started to draw our maps. We have started to lay our cables and light our fires. And every time we make the crossing, we can fill in more and more of the map. It does not matter at first that we do not understand all of the wildlife—any more than we need to know what is happening, specifically, in the social media industry—it is more important to know approximately where we are going in our new environment. Using instinct as our tool, we venture forth; and organisations that refuse to adapt and to move with our times risk eventual alienation. As several headlines have proclaimed in recent years, “The revolution will not be televised . . . but it will be tweeted.”

Once again, of course, this brings us to politics. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* is a song by Gil Scott-Heron; it was first recorded for his 1970 album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. The song’s message is obvious from its title; perhaps a more interesting observation is the aforementioned proliferation of its title in recent headlines (it has been used and re-used like an example of Open Educational Resources). The headline has been used to cover events as diverse as US midterm elections, regime change in the Middle East, and the London riots mentioned earlier. In fact, the headline itself is interesting at face value. Televised politics (one inference might be) are redundant politics: the authentic voice of the people will be heard (*is heard?*) via the channels of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. For every negative application of a micro-blogging site (a real-time invitation to riot, for example), there is a positive application that might be used in the moral counter-balance. Social media allows us both to gauge and to proffer opinion, in a manner that is never meant to be anything but ephemeral: it is the equivalent of a thermometer, reading the political temperature *of the moment*. Who would have thought that we might ever be able to be “friends” with our local, regional, or national political representative?

“The revolution will not be televised . . . but it will be tweeted” provides a clear and ongoing message with regards to the interdependence—we might even say symbiosis—between social media and politics. After all, at first glance, democracy and social media would

appear to be easy bedfellows: indeed, in these days of boasted transparency, a direct communications channel between the governed and the government would seem like perfect sense. But to what end? The logical follow-through is a journey towards an interconnected, symbiotic body politic (perhaps a good idea?), or a maelstrom of unmanageable political din, what with our age of mass loquacity showing no sign of taking a pause for breath. Now that the social web, in many cases, is the default place where people spend time on discussions of issues that are important to them, there is little chance of the current situation changing any time soon. The users of social media, we might say, have responded to and made a political decision that affects us all, in one way or another.

## Cyber Tools and Virtual Weapons

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## Chapter Eight

# Conflict in online learning

Conflict: a situation that entails disagreement and is perceived and manifest as incompatible or opposing opinions or behaviours.

This chapter argues that a necessary component of online learning design is the deliberate creation of conflict. I argue that conflict is not a by-product of creative design; it is an important ingredient in creative design; as such, it should be planned for, and the emphasis on its creation should not be downplayed. Drawing on the work on groups by Wilfred Bion and Anton Obholzer, the paper argues that the creative urges of learners are engaged via the application of group conflict. Via an understanding of the importance of conflict and brief studies of both group formation and of conflict in groups, this reflective and theoretical paper explores learner anxiety, especially through a psychoanalytic lens.

### *The importance of conflict*

Among the many definitions of conflict available, Laursen and Hafen (2010) offer the following: “conflict entails disagreement, which is manifest in incompatible or opposing behaviors or views. Conflict is distinct from related constructs such as aggression, dominance, competition, and anger; any of these may arise during a conflict, but they are neither

necessary nor defining features." In the same way that illness is important to a human being, conflict (as represented by Laursen and Hafen) is important to the immune system of any group. As individuals, we need to catch colds and endure fevers, the better to protect ourselves against more serious metabolic assaults; as a group, we must go through periods of conflict to keep together or to pave the way to dissolution and disbandonment. "No group can be entirely harmonious," writes the Conflict Research Consortium (2005), "for then it would lack process and structure. Group formation is a result of both association and dissociation, so that both conflict and cooperation serve a social function. Some certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation." Or as Coser himself writes, six decades earlier, conflict is "a form of socialization" (Coser, 1956, p. 31). Among other things, Coser argues in favour of conflict's role in establishing and maintaining group identities (see below). Indeed, for a group to prevail, the members must respect the idiosyncratic differences of the other members, and often this respect will happen at an instinctive, unconscious level.

However, not all members of a group will either like one another or maintain a steady sense of calm; nor do "surface" displays of tolerance and quasi-respect mean that conflict, by necessity, will be subdued. Conscious attempts made to tolerate a group member's characteristics, behaviour, or personality are deliberate methods of containing and responding to group anxiety; and group anxiety is a valuable commodity. If a group does not contain tension or friction—or in the unlikely event that the group members appreciate one another's individual qualities equally well—the group is slowly drained of life fluid and energy; it becomes apathetic, exhausted; and it dies. Although studies of behaviour and group dynamics might have moved on from what the text *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921c) propounded, we remain in thrall to a group mind (or a herd mind) and it is an extremely wilful person who does not, after a due process of indoctrination, conditioning, or group "reasoning", give up his/her individual ego in favour of the group ideal. But this does not happen immediately, and conflict must precede any such act of brainwashing. Referring to Coser's seminal text (1956), the Conflict Research Consortium (2005) continues: "Coser makes a distinction between two types of conflict: that in which the goal is personal and subjective, and that in which the matter in contention has an impersonal, objective aspect." The latter



are likely to be more severe and radical. These are conflicts in which parties understand themselves as representatives of collectives or groups, fighting not for themselves, but rather for the goals and ideals of the group. Elimination of personal reasons tends to make conflict more intense. On the other hand, when parties are pursuing a common goal, objectification of the conflict can serve as a unifying element.

Put simply, there is no certain long-term future or function for a group that does not create, control, and, above all, learn from its own internal conflicts (not to mention the conflicts with forces beyond the group's boundaries). Furthermore, as educators, we would do well to remember that the learners who enroll in our courses are unpredictable. Previously (Mathew, 2011), I argued that the most unpredictable factor in most dynamics is the human being, on the grounds that a piece of technology might well let us down, but in general it will work or it will not work. A human being in a distance learning course is infinitely more variable; or to put it another way, a human being is infinitely more unreliable, which ushers in a host of ironies, of course. However, it might lead us to concede that no group is less likely to prevail than one in which everyone agrees. Without the tension that derives from conflict, the work produced by the learners (for example, on discussion boards) might be patchy, irrespective of subject matter.

Conflict can be used in a variety of ways in an educational setting. In the opinion of Rozycki and Clabaugh (1999):

The explosiveness, the outward costs, and the divisiveness of conflict are so great that it is often difficult to see the ways in which conflict fulfils socially useful functions. Yet it does at least the following three things. First, it promotes loyalty within the group. Second, it signals the needs for, and helps promote, short-run social change. And third, it appears intimately involved in moving societies towards new levels of social integration.

Or, to expand upon the point:

If conflict pits groups and organizations against one another, it also tends to promote unity within each of the conflicting groups. The necessity to work together against a common foe submerges rivalries within the group and people, who otherwise are competitors, to work together in harmony . . . [It] serves to notify the society that serious problems exist that is [*sic*] not being handled by the traditional social

organization. It forces the recognition of those problems and encourages the development of new solutions to them.

### *Conflict's engine*

But how does it work? For most people (and certainly anyone possessed by a punitive superego among their psychic apparatus), conflict is a “bad” thing, a “negative” thing—“unnecessary”. It is all too easy, when considering the notion of conflict, to think of political skirmishes and foreign wars, riots at the hands of *homo urbanis* (aided nowadays by one of conflict's cleverer tools, social media), or hooliganism, hate crimes, domestic violence—a relationship (however large the scale) in which power transfers from one party to the other, in which there is a winner and a cowed, blooded, frightened, or dead loser. Indeed, if we transfer the argument to a seat of pedagogy, the argument, in the eyes of many, would maintain its hold, at least to a certain extent.

“If a person sees the school in the image of a moral community, a Temple,” write Rozycki and Clabaugh (1999),

conflict seems to be an indication of something wrong. Similarly, the image of the school as Factory tolerates little conflict. But this is primarily because under both images, the school is seen as *monocratic* (emphasis in original), ruled by a single person, or group of people. Consequently, it is the perceptions of the powerholders that become the norm for the entire organization. The principal as moral leader speaks for the school. How subversive, how immoral, to suggest his interests might be narrower than those of the entire community! As director of production in the school factory, the principal looks at conflict as “inefficient”, impeding production. Again, to suggest that he might favor personal goals is to attack his competence or sincerity! So it is that our fixation with either image of the school blinds us to the way conflict serves to maintain and enhance groups . . . . Indeed, conflict may occur because it serves the interests of groups, particularly, the interests of group powerholders. In many school systems, board members promote antagonisms between school administrators and teachers because they feel that each group does its own job better that way. Also, such antagonism prevents administrators and teachers from forming a cohesive group against the school board.

Irrespective of any possible bias caused by the writers' country of origin (the US) or the focus on learners whose age is younger than those who attend university—even taking into account the fact that this quotation will be *sixteen years old* by the time this chapter is published—it is worth taking a moment to note the similarities with our own experiences. Worth too, perhaps, acknowledging the somewhat ambivalent stance towards the subject that the authors take.

"There are five basic functions which conflict serves both among different groups and within a single group," Rozycki and Clabaugh (1999) continue. "They are connection, definition, revitalization, reconnaissance and replication." If conflict is akin to a vehicle—to one of many vehicles—that can drive our learners through a particular course, then we should also acknowledge some of its engine's components. It is Rozycki and Clabaugh's notions of connection, definition, revitalisation, reconnaissance, and replication that form conflict's engine, we might say, although not necessarily in the way that those authors would agree with: not only are they the *functions* of conflict among different groups and within a single group; they are also (simultaneously and paradoxically) *the results, the causes, and the reasons* for conflict. They are part of the engine, which would not be able to function without them; but without the engine itself, the single parts are all but useless unless transferred to a different vehicle entirely.

### *Group formation*

It is easy to underestimate the importance of groups (and the accompanying methodologies) in the online learning milieu. Of course, solitary study is possible and is adamantly preferred by many learners. However, it is not the learners engaged in such study that need concern us for the moment. For the purposes of this paper, the learners are enrolled in an online course (the level of study need not concern us either). To facilitate a "classroom" spirit, or at least the sense of camaraderie, of communal intent, one tool that might be used is the discussion board. When used correctly, the discussion board is simultaneously a social adhesive in the online learning milieu, and a means of gauging how the group is fairing (including a sign of who is not providing a contribution). It can also be used as an assessment tool. In other words, not only can boards be used as collection repositories

for learners' thoughts and opinions, they can also be employed as a way of assessing tasks that have been achieved in groups. Indeed, discussion boards are an important part of the learners' experience, as useful as formative assessment and a ready way of augmenting group-based learner activity. But how do we make them successful?

A successful discussion board will probably display active engagement by the educator. This might include challenges to existing posts or the positioning of deliberately provocative statements in order to stimulate debate. If the discussion is synchronous (using a tool such as Collaborate, for example), the educator will show signs of knowledge and of wider research or reading; the educator should be prepared and should show clear signs of knowing the material to a high standard. The educator should also have encouraged the learners to have prepared well themselves: the learner who is not prepared will have less to contribute and will understand the discussion less. In a similar way (and in line with any face-to-face discussion), all parties in an online discussion will benefit from being confident with themselves and with sharing their opinions: the educator can encourage individual responses, whether the discussion is synchronous or asynchronous. Furthermore, a good discussion board might show evidence of participants who have considered the "five W questions"—who have considered, in other words, "What is important about this topic?" (for example); or "When did the event occur?"; or "Why is this important to the way we live our lives today?" And so on.

There are two other matters that should probably be addressed. For a discussion board to be successful as a learning tool, a task must be provided that will both engage the learner and provoke the learner into providing a spirited opinion or comeback. (One example might be a debate.) Long gone are the days when discussion boards were simply where chit-chat occurred, or where people with shared interests could talk through new releases, or unofficially "review" creative work in an atmosphere that veered from the cordial to the corrosive. Those discussion boards could be interesting or they could be dull; to a reasonable extent they gave an alternative to people who lived too far away to meet face-to-face with any kind of regularity (even if they had wanted to do so). The boards were entertaining, sometimes illuminating; but they can now be used in a wider variety of settings, including education. By using discussion boards we get to see if and to what extent people's views differ; the educator is able to see how

an individual learner is dealing with the information that has been provided (by the educator and by the other members of the group). Group formation will occur as the result of disagreements among its members every bit as much as it will as the result of participant harmony: the group is (usually) not a perfect shape; it is jagged, with uneven sides, and people *should* disagree as well as agree. Misunderstandings are not only inevitable (or at least highly probably), they are life-affirming for the group. They help to assert a sense of structure; help to let people know what they might expect from a certain person in a certain situation, next time. From the educator's point of view, therefore, misunderstandings are to the good and should be encouraged (within ethical bounds). At the end of the disagreement, with the group structure (possibly) altered, it is the educator's responsibility to question why the misunderstanding occurred and what the group learned from the experience.

The second matter to be addressed, however, is the fact that many members of staff are anxious about new technologies and also about new methods of working that challenge the status quo. Discussion boards do both; the challenge would seem to be to convince all of the relevant staff to make regular contributions to the discussions, particularly in light of the fact that (in some cases) it has replaced some face-to-face delivery (Hedges et al, 2011). Regular contributions from the staff are the lifeblood of a successful discussion board: without a two-way means of communication, the project is unlikely to succeed for long.

We need problems. We are programmed to seek out forms of challenge and even peril. In an article entitled "Taking the non-problem seriously", Caroline Garland (1982) writes of the group in a psychotherapeutic setting, but the principles remain analogous. Referring to a "problem" who arrives for treatment "as representing the nodal point of the system within which his/her pathology exists", Garland argues that "if we put him/her into another system, the nodal point will of necessity be altered by this new system." We might infer, in that case, that the balance in any group system is a delicate, precarious thing. As the author continues:

In a group . . . we cannot change, directly, the rules governing the individual's pathological transactions within his own system, but we can bring about change in the individual by making him part of a powerful

alternative system, in which a different set of rules is operating . . . we may see every expression of interest and concern manifested in group matters as a step towards an involvement in the alternative system offered by the group, in which the rules, simply by being different, no longer serve to sustain the status quo. (1982, p. 6)

### *Conflict in the group situation*

The success or failure of conflict in a group situation depends on its management. Conflict is a very exacting ingredient: too much and there is the risk run that the group will fall to pieces, either because of a) factions forming that cannot agree on the simplest tasks, or b) a collection of individuals forming because no one can agree and no one can appreciate or respect the group leader, who will usually be the tutor. Conflict that is in too short supply, however (as mentioned above), can weaken the group with inertia and insipidity. Whatever else happens, the conflict that is built into the learning programme must be managed appropriately. The airing of differences, for example, should lead to a situation in which the members of the group are able to come up with both satisfying interpersonal relationships and quality decisions.

Using *Experiences in Groups* (1961) as one example, Wilfred Bion was one of the seminal writers on the subject of the life of the group, including what happens on a conscious and an unconscious level; and what is happening on an intra-psychoic plane. Stokes (1994, p. 20) provides us with a useful summary of the phenomenon. He writes:

Bion distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendency towards work on the primary task or work-group mentality, and a second, often unconscious, tendency to avoid work on the primary task, which he termed basic assumption mentality. These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work with reality, and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within or between group members.

It seems vital that we inspire writing that is linked to the primary task—on discussion boards, for example. Whereas the basic assumption mentality will likely lead to unstructured conflict, the deliberate

challenges within the work done by the group engaged by the primary task is productive. Managed well, the writing produced—in blogs, in wikis, on discussion boards, and finally in summative submissions—is drained of any stereotypical “coldness” by the structured conflict. In other words, with the scattered group, the implications are that clearly we want a primary task; but how do we avoid basic assumption mentality? Ironically, by stressing conflict itself.

What we must try to avoid is what Stokes (1994, p. 22) elaborates on in this passage:

When under the sway of a basic assumption, a group appears to be meeting as if for some hard-to-specify purpose upon which the members seem intently set. Group members lose their critical faculties and individual abilities, and the group as a whole has the appearance of having some ill-defined but passionately involving mission. Apparently trivial matters are discussed as if they are matters of life or death, which is how they may well feel to the members of the group, since the underlying anxieties are about psychological survival.

In this state of mind, the group seems to lose awareness of the passing of time, and is apparently willing to continue endlessly with trivial matters. On the other hand, there is little capacity to bear frustration, and quick solutions are favoured. In both cases, members have lost their capacity to stay in touch with reality and its demands. Other external realities are also ignored or denied; the group closes itself off from the outside world and retreats into paranoia. A questioning attitude is impossible; any who dare to do so are regarded as either foolish, mad or heretical. A new idea or formulation which might offer a way forward is likely to be too terrifying to consider because it involves questioning cherished assumptions, and loss of the familiar and predictable, which is felt to be potentially catastrophic.

Stokes (1994, p. 19) also cites Sigmund Freud, another pioneer in the field of group dynamics: “Essentially, Freud argued that the members of a group, particularly large groups such as crowds at political rallies, follow their leader because he or she personifies certain ideals of his/her own. The leader shows the group how to clarify and act on its goals.” Something similar occurs with the teacher and the learners in an online learning programme. To take further examples from the twinned worlds of training and psychoanalysis, Sebastian Foulkes (Foulkes, 1964) argued for the necessity of a reliably consistent



context, and Donald Winnicott (Winnicott, 1965) stated the case for the “spontaneous gesture”. In terms of the latter, it is worth noting (parenthetically) the contribution that Winnicott made when he spoke of the true self and the false self in this same paper. Winnicott’s view was that the true self described a sense of self based on spontaneous authentic experience, whereas the false self was a defensive mechanism that protected the true self by disguising it. Winnicott predicted serious emotional problems for people who seemed unable to feel spontaneous, alive or real to themselves in any part of their lives, yet managed to put on a successful exhibition—or act—of being real. Feelings of emotional deadness and fakeness can result if the false self is overactive.

However, it is possible to wedge together the concepts of Foulkesian consistency and Winnicottian spontaneity: these emotional entities are not mutually exclusive, even if at first they seem paradoxical. Indeed, might we not say that reliability married with chaos (for which we should probably read creativity) is at the heart of education—online or face-to-face and that a balance between the two might be the very best spur to student invention?

### *Learner anxiety*

Anton Obholzer (Obholzer, 1994, pp. 171–172) writes: “All societies have an ‘education service’, in the broadest sense, in order to teach their members to use the tools they need to survive.” If learners encounter conflict, however, it might be useful to examine what exactly they are learning. They are learning the rules of argumentative engagement; they are learning the skills of how to stave off boredom and ennui. For, as Obholzer continues:

the education service is intended to shield us from the risk of going under. It is also, therefore, an institution that is supposed to cope with—whether by encouragement or denial—competition and rivalry. The debate about which nation has the best education system could be seen as a debate about who will survive and who will end up against the wall.

Furthermore, Obholzer (a teacher/trainer himself) is convincing in his assertion that workplaces (and by extension online environments in which work is the main reason for meeting and engagement) are



containers for elements of anxiety, and in his implication that we might draw something analogous from our work with learners. "Institutions," he writes, "often serve as containers for the unwanted or difficult-to-cope-with aspects of ourselves." (Here the writer uses contain and its derivatives in the sense of the metabolising of anxieties, to such an extent that feelings become bearable. When this happens, anxieties have been "contained" (Bion, 1967)). Education, in addition to providing a specific need "through its primary task, also deals constantly with fundamental human anxieties about life and death, or, in more psychoanalytic terms, about annihilation . . . the individual who is prey to these primitive anxieties seeks relief by projecting these anxieties into another"; and it is "this process of containment that eventually makes possible the maturational shift from the paranoid-schizoid position, which involves fragmentation and denial of reality, to the depressive position, where integration, thought and appropriate responses to reality are possible. In an analogous way, the institutions referred to above (including education) serve to contain these anxieties for society as a whole" (p. 170).

But how might this happen? In "The absence of 'E'" (Mathew, 2011), I compared two distance learning programmes in a reflective, impressionistic manner, using (limited) qualitative data. One of these programmes had only Internet contact; the other of these programmes had no Internet contact (a prison setting, assessments sent by Royal Mail). I argued that the absence of the Internet had very little negative impact on the learner experience: but the person facilitating the group most certainly received a negative impact.

tutor online might be subjected to the transmission of negative feelings (from the learners) that might have been dissipated more effectively via the Internet, if this option had been available. Anxiety about assignments and exams, though directed primarily at the learners' respective tutors, were projected onto (and into) me, thanks to the absence of "E"—the absence of an online provision . . . Perhaps an Internet conduit of some description might have helped to contain the learners' anxieties, and by doing so, have improved the overall learning experience; just as likely, however, it would have complicated matters. (pp. 485–486)

Online and possibly "protected" by a faux-identity, a learner is able to express opinions, respond to conflict, solve problems, make

mistakes . . . and, above all, endure anxiety. The psychoanalyst and organisational psychologist Elliot Jacques (Jacques, 1965, p. 246) puts the matter succinctly when he writes:

Out of the working through of the depressive position, there is further strengthening of the capacity to accept and tolerate conflict and ambivalence. One's work need no longer be experienced as perfect . . . because inevitable imperfection is no longer felt as bitter persecuting failure. Out of this mature resignation comes . . . true serenity, serenity which transcends imperfection by accepting it.

In a roundabout way, conflict has led to peace!

### *The creation of conflict*

One of the problems, of course, with the deliberate creation of conflict in an educational setting is the setting itself—the educational setting—in and around which rules are often in place to stamp out corrosive behaviour. To reiterate what we have said above, the balance is delicate; or to put it another way, we face the paradox of challenging our learners up to a point and no further, via online discussion, robust (but fair) feedback to assessments that are deliberately provocative (they engage a learner's individual or collective sense of outrage or anger); or via the deliberate imposition of unexpected questions (unexpected, that is, by the learners). Alternatively, the educator might show a film that will spark debate and claim (for the duration of the session) that he or she is very much in favour of its topic, which would normally be condemned as inappropriate; or the same might go for a controversial piece of text, music, art—broadly, anything that will challenge and engage the learner's opinion. In addition, one might use the full potential of alternative identities and the deliberate mischief that they can cause, all (naturally) within the institution's strict ethical guidelines, and (to be blunt about it) within one's own professional common-sense. After all, if there are limits as to how far a *learner* is allowed to go (and if there are not, there should be), there are certainly limits to how far an educator should permit matters to continue once a boundary has been reached . . . and then breached. It should go without saying that we as educators will not tolerate cyberbullying, virtual crimes, or any Munchausen-by-the-Internet complex.

The delicate nature involved in the creation of conflict suggests that one must—simultaneously—avoid any downward spiral of incivility. One is trying to use conflict as a driver for creative thought and philosophical or quasi-philosophical thinking (whatever the academic subject). A downward spiral of incivility—any situation where one party exhibits disrespectful uncivil behaviour and the opposing party responds in kind but in an escalated manner—will create an atmosphere of tit-for-tat gainsaying and an unproductive situation that has nowhere to go but downward, towards its disintegration—and possibly the disintegration of the group. Although we simultaneously both want and do not want friction among and with our learners *that is out of our control*, we very much hope for the creativity that comes with tension and strife *which we control on our learners' behalf*.

### *Final thoughts*

This chapter is largely a work of reflection, and combines work in psychoanalysis with work in the environment of online learning (across different subjects and university faculties). In theory, the subject being taught/studied should not affect the central notion of what this chapter presents. Where the matter might differ, one would think, is where the learner's method of study is largely solitary. But not necessarily: if sufficient planning has gone into the course, the questions and challenges will be timed for impact in the programme, and of course there is scope for further "clashes" when it is time for the educator to provide feedback. Overall, it is important for the learner to feel not only that he or she must contribute thoughts and opinions; he must also be in a position to justify the thoughts and opinions as well. Although it might seem that a necessary constituent of conflict is the construction of a group identity and dynamic, conflict within oneself is perfectly plausible. (Indeed, Sigmund Freud built the industry of psychoanalysis that exists to this day on the premise that one is constantly at struggle with oneself, psychiatrically speaking.)

Perhaps the matter—the use of conflict and the acknowledgement of anxiety—comes down to something only a little more complicated than a war against boredom in online learning. In education (as elsewhere) boredom is a turn-off, both for the learner and the educator; and if we propose that for many people the Internet comes equipped with a "soothing" factor, can we also extrapolate and suggest that for

some learners the Internet helps us to “relax” into our studies, the Web acting like a soporific, an anaesthetic? Even if this is the case, the need for conflict is not abandoned. Indeed, the presence of conflict precedes the soothing, in a similar but less intense example of the post-trauma depression. The apposite inclusion of conflict might constitute one step towards avoiding the situation in which the learner simply “goes through the motions” and reflects (perhaps truthfully, perhaps disingenuously, if he or she knows what the educator expects to read) in order to receive a respectable grade.

It is certainly easy to be lazy on the Internet, if one is not guided properly by a competent distance learning facilitator. This facilitator might employ tactics which in most other settings would be perceived as bad manners or rudeness. For the sake of the exercise, he or she might seem not to listen; he might seem to read with a closed mind and not to want to countenance any opinions that are not shared with what he or she has already pronounced. Rather than using facts to support his opinions, he cherry-picks from his opinions and presents them *as* facts. He interrupts; or (on the contrary) shows the sort of hesitation that suggests that he does not know his material one iota. Alternatively, he reformulates his own opinions as he goes along. Worse still, he pretends never to have had his *earlier* opinion and doggedly insists that the learner has misread his previous contentions. He does not stay impartial: quite the opposite. He either hogs the limelight and posts too much or posts little but with messages that are cheeky or abrasive; routinely he laughs at his own jokes.

Chaperoned and helped by the right hands, the learner may find a rewarding, enriching educational experience that builds and consolidates, and which enables him/her to engage in social learning. We introduce conflict via techniques of the unexpected, by the pushing and redefining of barriers; but above all, we manage the conflict that we create. (For example, we might introduce a controversial topic and then seem to endorse it. We might ask our learners to adopt opposing viewpoints in a “staged” debate.) Carefully managed conflict should ablate the existence of the perfectly natural human need for conflict that will arise in the absence of friction, or in an atmosphere of sterility. Individuals who join a group to meet their interpersonal needs require the same challenges and pedagogic perturbation as those who are actively motivated by task concerns. If we could think of conflict as a creative act, perhaps it would seem more attractive.

## Conflict in Online Learning

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## Chapter Nine

# The Internet is unwell . . . and will not be at school today

### *Introduction: an abstract through a negative lens*

It might be useful to be explicit about what this chapter does not contain. This chapter will not contain hearty recommendations of online learning from seasoned professionals in the field, or from the confident learners who have been lucky enough to work with them. This chapter will not contain a defence of online learning. Neither, however, is it intended as an attack on the same, or as an evagination of the manifold accounts of successful online learning projects that bespatter the World Wide Web. It will not contain a comprehensive overview of online learning practices around the globe (assuming that such a study would be possible at anything less than book length, anyway). Nor is this chapter's ambition (or that of its author) such that a more localised examination of the online learning environment in UK Universities has been undertaken. Instead of any of the above, this chapter presents a picture of a Fragile Learner, struggling and anxious in the online milieu, and attempts to view his plight through the lens of psychoanalytic applications. In the course of researching this work, however, the author discovered a good deal of anxiety among colleagues who had been asked to work in this way for

the first time in an attempt to meet learner demand. Using transcripts of short interviews with three anxious colleagues, the aim is to show how debilitating an enforced teaching role on the Internet can be, and we apply to the learning process the theoretical work of Carl Rogers, Jacques Lacan, and John Steiner. We discover that Rogers had discussed the Fragile Learner as long ago as the middle of the previous century, in all but name; and by employing a stitchworked tapestry of anecdotes and memories, the former of which are accurate and the latter of which are subject to the customary erosion caused by time, self-protection and chronic narcissism, the chapter refers to a learner's shame and humiliation in online learning.

### *A reflective return to absence*

In 2011, I published a paper entitled "The absence of E", in which I compared the experiences that I had had with two specific learning programmes. One of these had learners enrolled who had no access to the Internet whatsoever (they were detained, at Her Majesty's Pleasure, in a maximum-security prison for Young Offenders aged eighteen to twenty-one), and the other had learners enrolled who only had access to the Internet and not a single meeting with their tutor. Anecdotally accurate and scientifically questionable, the paper provided the expected (and desired) split reactions of apoplexy and high praise when I presented it to a large crowd in Italy in the same year. I argued that in these specific examples—with acknowledged differences in academic subject matter, academic level, age group, geographical location, and so on (there was scarcely a control factor in sight!)—the learners on the Internet-only course, with their academic levels capped at a pre-Masters plateau, experienced no obvious sense of deprivation in their pedagogic endeavours. Banned from using the Internet because of the natures of their crimes, their distance learning programmes consisted of solitary study in their cells and then a weekly group meeting with a facilitator (me), at which their issues were resolved, their essays printed out, and then the essays would be sent by regular postal services to the people who would grade the work. I argued that as a result of this model, the learners were able to channel their dammed-up anxieties into one factotum every week (again, me) and that the teachers (at a distance) were oblivious to any



negative emotions and feelings of insecurity that the learners were not shy to show in the classroom setting. “[W]ould this task group have benefited from regular access to the Internet?” I asked rhetorically (Mathew, 2011, p. 482).

Possibly it would have lent each learner more of a sense of autonomy, the acquisition of which might have led to a more determined approach; but it is plain to see that it was not the medium of travel that was the problem—it made no difference if the assignment was sent by e-mail or handed to me to put in the post—the problem was me. Or more specifically, the problem was whoever happened to be in my shoes, in front of those distance learners once a week. My very presence was a shortcut (or so they believed) to the right answer, or to the right way of researching something; with nobody to guide them, arguably, these learners’ experiences would have been more honest and more robust. A human intermediary between the learners and their (numerous and unseen) teachers was a mere substitute for the Internet. They already had all of the papers and materials that were required; it is my contention that the Internet might even have got in their way and hampered their progress (Mathew, 2011).

By contrast, the programme that was delivered entirely online consisted of learners who were able to direct their anxieties, fears and complaints directly to the primary educator, via the Web. Despite the existence of online services designed to support our learners with issues outside the main course of study, the students enrolled in overseas settings used the teacher, not only as the first port of call, but very often as the only port of call. And while it is not possible to quantify anxiety precisely, it seems evident that the overseas learners, with no access to their tutor, exhibited a good deal more angst than even the learners in the prison with their one day a week with their facilitator (which, in turn, as above, was not even noticed by their actual teachers outside the prison walls). From these observations, I concluded that learners without access to the Internet on a distance learning programme were not disadvantaged; that educators teaching on such a distance learning programme were spared the anxiety of their online colleagues; and that the online tutor takes on more than a pedagogic role—he or she is often obliged to take on a pastoral responsibility, whether or not he or she has been trained in such matters or has any willingness to engage in this field of specialism. Again, I wondered aloud:

Has a distance learning programme succeeded if it cannot claim to have offered relevant pastoral support for learners . . . Should a distance learning programme plan the pastoral role that is sometimes required by students? While working at the prison I was able to contain such issues, were they ever to arise, but it might be argued that the Internet, while providing a safe and (largely) efficient mode of delivery, paradoxically creates further challenges by making feedback too easy and embedding a certain (over?) sensitivity to students' needs. (The broad question, in a nutshell, might be: Where does the pastoral role fit in with the role of the distance learning lecturer? . . . Do we need to be better aware about the links between pedagogy and the containment of learner anxiety? (Mathew, 2011, p. 485)

"The absence of E" was a highly subjective and personalised account, of course, and it delivered me into a small amount of very small-scale trouble, part of which was its very intention. (If you cannot set the cat among the pigeons at an international conference, then where can you do so?) However, the conclusions that were drawn back then (three years being a long span in technological terms) are all the more valid today. Despite the ease with which we might have assumed to have taken to online learning by now, there are doubts that thrive; there exist anxieties that only experience in the medium will placate, with words of reassurance seeming redundant and even self-negating. "When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technically," I quoted Slavoj Žižek as saying (Žižek 2008)

and can be exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when, through TV "live coverage" you can simultaneously "experience" a battle in the Iraqi desert and an opera performance in Beijing; when, in a global digital network, time is nothing but speed, instantaneity; when a winner in a reality show counts as the great man of the people; then, yes, still looming like a spectre over all this uproar are the questions, What is it for? Where are we going? What is to be done? (p. 274)

### *Rogers and the Fragile Learner*

I had arrived at the term "Fragile Learner" and had defined it privately with a view to writing about it (or about him or her) long before I read Elizabeth Chapman Houlst's exemplary work on academic resilience

and the resilient learner, *Adult Learning and La Recherche Féminine* (2012). To no man do I bow in my admiration of this work, but I mention it for reasons other than simple respect. Proving that ideas are in the air for anyone to pluck (a conceit shored up, perhaps, by the startling similarities in the views offered by the interviewees herein), Hoult and I had chosen to concentrate on facets of our learners that had not been explored in any great detail up to that point. Where Hoult's work focused (inter alia) on strategies employed by adult learners that serve to keep them in education, my own focus was on the reasons why learners struggle specifically on online programmes—these reasons being geographical, cultural, social-economical, and so on. When I co-wrote the paper entitled “Distance learning students: should we use technology or pedagogy to overcome work and life” (Mathew & Sapsed, 2012), for example, we were thinking of the Fragile Learner in all but name. In this paper we discussed “the stories of three learners on the distance learning option of a Masters degree in Public Health, which is offered by a university in the United Kingdom. These learners were challenged by obstacles related to their employment”, and the paper

outline[d] some of the technological and pedagogic strategies that were employed to address these challenges. In a highly reflective manner we present(ed) findings that might suggest little more than common sense—that with distance learning programmes, both technology and pedagogy are vital components but are interdependent on one another—but we hope[d] to show ways in which an academic tutor online assumes roles that are often beyond the customary scope of teaching: he or she is frequently obliged to assume pastoral care roles that might be better suited to a counsellor or a professional in a different industry.

A Fragile Learner is close to giving up at any point—close to breaking. He or she is on a brink: a solitary waft of condemnatory breeze can push this student into the pedagogic abyss. Unlike the more determined and self-confident online student, the Fragile Learner might struggle with motivation and self-directed study habits. He or she might also struggle with the technology itself—or with the notion of being forced into online groups for the purposes of completing a task. Time management might be problematic; the ability to conduct research and to communicate through writing even more so.

The notion of such a precarious, knife-edge *modus operandi* is not new, however, although it might be shunned often as a modish concern. Indeed, we can refer to the middle of the twentieth century for a glimpse of what I have termed fragility. No lesser figure than Carl Rogers might well have been discussing the Fragile Learner in the Fifties. For although he did not use the term fragile learner in his “explosive” paper entitled “Personal thoughts on teaching and learning” (Rogers, 1957), this work contains a compressed blueprint of the traits and characteristics that such a learner exhibits. The interesting thing, in addition, is that the paper’s only personal subject (and provider of sensory evidence) was the author himself. Similarly, the adjective “explosive” was Rogers’s own reflection on his work’s reception at a Harvard conference. But why was the paper so challenging? One interpretation might be that even now, nearly sixty years on, its unrelentingly pessimistic tone on the twinned topics of teaching and learning remains shocking. Delivered as it was at Harvard of all places (an expensive seat of education), the paper’s banner of futility was a source of professional outrage.

What does it say? Rogers prefaces his thoughts with a paragraph in which he implies, in a somewhat self-deprecatory manner, that none of what will follow is to be taken generally or non-specifically: what follows are opinions, nothing more and nothing less:

I find it a very troubling thing to think, particularly when I think about my own experiences and try to extract from those experiences the meaning that seems genuinely inherent in them. At first such thinking is vary [*sic*] satisfying, because it seems to discover sense and pattern in a whole host of discrete events. But then it very often becomes dismaying, because I realize how ridiculous these thoughts, which have much value to me, would seem to most people. My impression is that if I try to find the meaning of my own experience it leads me, nearly always, in directions regarded as absurd. (Rogers, 1957, p. 275)

Continuing in the same vein (of equal parts self-flagellation and expletive satire), the author writes: “It seems to me that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential, and has little or no significant influence on behavior” (p. 276). At least with this statement the author adds something of an ironic caveat: “That sounds so ridiculous I can’t help but question it at the same time that I present it.”

"I realize increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behavior," he adds; and "I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning" . In other words, Rogers seemed to be asking: What is the point of more formalised (more formulaic?) learning? There is nothing worth learning apart from what I discover by myself; the presence of an educator is tokenistic at best (we interpret further). Crucially, Rogers was saying that those who teach are redundant in the learner's mind; and having rubbishised his own achievements as an educator, the author decides: "I realize that I have lost interest in being a teacher" and "I realize that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that have some significant influence on my own behavior."

There is much about the above that pertains to the construct of the Fragile Learner. Fearful in advance of a disappointing pedagogic exchange, the Fragile Learner is aided by anxiety and a pre-trauma depression to demand things on his or her terms. This might mean that he or she concludes in advance that formalised teaching is worthless; or it might mean that he or she goes into the experience with nervous trepidation, already resigned to the option of a painless retreat when matters become difficult, at which point he or she can blame the teacher or technology, safe in the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if I believe that something is bad before I experience it, it will be bad. This might even qualify as an application of the psychoanalytic concept of projection, as defined by Laplanche and Pontalis as an

operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even objects, which the subject refuses to recognise or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing. Projection so understood is a defence of very primitive origin which may be seen at work especially in paranoia, but also in "normal" modes of thought such as superstition. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2006, p. 349)

The Fragile Learner, primed by anxiety, might be unconscious of, or successful at managing, feelings of self-hatred and the fear of failure. On experiencing this very same failure, he or she "projects" the feelings on to another "guilty party". And although aggressive conduct is outside the purview of this paper, it is worth noting, parenthetically as it were, that the Fragile Learner does not always know how to behave

with civility while online. The antagonistic nature of some participants to online interactions lends credence to the notion that there are those who support an internal system of beliefs surrounding the idea of voluntary violence. In the life of someone who already maintains something of a marginalised existence, we might easily believe that emotions overwhelm the capacity to rely on a rational response; self-destructive behaviours are apt to be precipitated.

At the heart of any such systems—as a general rule—will be anxiety.

### *Interview one*

The three interviews that punctuate this % were conducted in identical circumstances. All three subjects work inside the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences. All three subjects had been required to undertake some of their teaching commitment online for the very first time. Although the questions that were asked were the same, for the sake of completion and flow, other comments that add to the overall picture have been left in. Other comments that are not pertinent to this paper and refer mainly to other issues have been excised.

*Interviewer:* What is your experience of online learning, either as a learner or as an educator?

*Subject 1:* From a learner's point of view, I have done a number of online packs. From a university point of view, the mandatory training type of packs, and also being enrolled on the LEAN Institute healthcare—I had to do a few packs with them, looking at service improvement, as a student.

*I:* What were your general impressions of them as a student?

*S1:* I quite enjoyed doing the packs. To me they're a form of escapism. When I ought to be working and I can't concentrate on other things, I go on to do a pack—because it takes me away from the shop floor, if you like, and I can do something positive.

*I:* As someone new to online learning, were the packs organised well enough that you could follow them easily?

*S1:* Yes, on the whole. I think, one of the downsides is, with some of the questions you can remember the answers, so you can quickly whizz through them, having remembered the answers (from a previous visit to the resource).

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*I:* So these were predominantly question-and-answer-type packs?

*S1:* Yeah. I find them quite helpful. I think, from an educational point of view, online packages are a great way forward.

*I:* With that in mind, would you be happy to take on more responsibility for other learning packages going online?

*S1:* Yes, I would be quite interested. In the reorganisation that we had in 2012, there was a role for online learning and there was one half of me that would have been interested in that. It would have been my second choice in terms of roles and responsibilities.

*I:* If you think back to before you taught online, when you first thought about teaching online, how did you feel then?

*S1:* Terrified. When I first thought about doing a distance learning pack, I envisaged the old Open University model, with books and packs, and that's what I had in mind. When [my manager] started talking about e-books and the like I nearly freaked! I thought, I can't do this! I'm not brilliantly computer literate and I didn't know how it would be set up, and I was in a complete panic about it.

*I:* Did you see being computer literate as a necessary part of offering an online course?

*S1:* I thought you'd have to be. I don't know enough about computer programmes to know how much I would need to be involved in the development side of it. I thought, if anything goes wrong, what do I do? It was that kind of thing. I didn't know what support there was.

*I:* Why do you think you thought this way at the time?

*S1:* I didn't know what kind of support there was out there. I thought, if I go online and something goes wrong, I'm leaving the students in limbo without a package working—electronic things, if a system crashes, what kind of back-up there is. I was scared about that side of things.

*I:* I think we can agree that the most unpredictable thing about any educational interchange is the person. The most predictable is the technology. It will either work or it won't work. There's no kind of middle bit. People are endlessly variable; technology isn't. So did you think, I don't have a back-up plan if this doesn't work?

*S1:* Yes, but also, having got it online, you think—with any organisation—something new comes in and you try it, and the support is there initially but then it goes. I was worried about being left in limbo with students shouting at me, saying that these packs don't work.



*I:* Have your feelings changed since the course started—or more specifically, since you started teaching online?

*S1:* Definitely. I think the support you've given me is absolutely magnificent.

*I:* Thank you; that's very kind.

*S1:* I think your enthusiasm for it has made me want to take it on more . . . and going back to a question you asked me earlier, I think if you hadn't been as supportive as you were, I think I wouldn't. I know there's someone behind me, and you've given me confidence to go ahead and do this. I'm dreading the day when you send me an e-mail saying you're moving on [to another job]. People do move on and I'd be absolutely lost without you.

*I:* How do you feel about online learning now?

*S1:* I think it's a brilliant concept. Concept's the wrong word. Approach. But I do have some concerns. In terms of engagement . . . I know we've talked about students having certificates when they complete courses (i.e., certificates generated automatically upon completion of the online tasks). That would be something, from my point of view, that would be useful to stay students have done this. In terms of underpinning learning, the way computers are going now, you can have Blackboard now and BREO now on mobile phones and tablets, take them anywhere—instead of books and documents (which are harder to transport). As a way of learning, it's really positive.

*I:* What do you think is the future of online learning?

*S1:* I think it's going to be around for a long time. I think it's going to get more technical. To me, it's probably the way forward in terms of student attraction, in terms of student numbers—because I can see we can work with overseas universities—and I think as long as you can build in a way of checking that students are engaging . . . as long as you put in safeguards . . . For the [name of the course], the students submit a (physical, hard copy) portfolio, so they've passed from that point of view. Possibly if we could get a discussion board going, and I could chip in every now and then . . . The last time I tried it, it was really a one-sided feedback. The students didn't discuss anything with each other; it was all directed at me.

### *Anecdotal gobbet the first*

As part of an online course about online learning in 2014, I was invited to contribute my thoughts to a video filmed by a female student of approximately nineteen years of age. I wrote:



Hello, everyone. I've posted a couple of thoughts about Scenario 2 below, but one thing I don't think has been mentioned is the student's response in Scenario 1. Although she has technology at her disposal, I would argue that she doesn't seem particularly happy with what she's been able to achieve. Now, granted, some of this might have been for the benefit of the camera; but perhaps it should be noted more often than it possibly is: the realisation that not even what we have access to now will be sufficient for some of our students; that it won't be fast enough or loud enough, etc. How do we, as educators keep up with student demand even if we DO fully embrace the notion of mobile learning or new advances?

### *Crash course in anxiety*

The study of anxiety is at the root of psychoanalytic explorations of the human condition. Given that psychoanalysis is a field in which an adult's problems, however outlandish or outré, can be "explained" or qualified by the discovery of an event (or series of events) in that person's childhood, it is not difficult to believe that an anxiety about learning per se can also be rooted in one's babyhood or infancy. But what is anxiety? From the acres of literature on the subject, it is easy to determine that the definition has no simple consensus. In the same way that we might disagree on what individually we have self-diagnosed when we utter the sentence "I have a cold," we are likely to be discussing different matters when we confess to sensations of anxiety. Let us attempt, however, to sum up the findings.

Often triggered by events that are unique to an individual, anxiety is a term used to describe a number of psychological conditions. It is something experienced, to one extent or another, by every man, woman, and child, and arguably even by some animals (separation anxiety in pet dogs and horses, for example). It is the sensation of stressful expectation that one feels for no apparent good reason; the gloomy dread with which one sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night. As a state of worry or nervousness, anxiety is often accompanied by a vague unpleasant feeling that something bad is about to happen. Mild anxiety is vague and unsettling, while severe anxiety can lead to panic attacks which can be extremely debilitating, having a serious impact on daily life. For the purposes of this submission, we will be clear to

distinguish anxiety from stress: they are not the same. Nor is anxiety a synonym for fear, although the terms are often used interchangeably.

Among the many thousands of words on the subject penned by Sigmund Freud, his description of anxiety as having an “unpleasurable character” in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Freud, 1916–1917) seems like a masterpiece of understatement. However, a decade later, he gave us a full-length exegesis of anxiety, which is often cited to this day. “If a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child,” he writes (1926d, p. 87), “it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension.” According to Martin Heidegger, “anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is nowhere and nothing” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 231); whereas Melanie Klein cites the Grandfather of Psychoanalysis when she writes: “Freud put forward to begin with the hypothesis that anxiety arises out of a direct manifestation of libido” (Klein, 1948, p. 25). She expands this opinion by stating that “in young children it is unsatisfied libidinal excitation which turns into anxiety” and that “the earliest content of anxiety is the infant’s feeling of danger lest his need should not be satisfied because the mother is ‘absent’ ” (p. 26). Klein (1946, p. 1) had previously written: “In early infancy anxieties characteristic of psychosis arise which drive the ego to develop specific defence mechanisms”—which made a link between anxiety and the systems of defence that we use in troublesome situations, or in the predictions of troublesome situations. She makes it clear in the later of these two papers that her belief is that “anxiety is aroused by the danger which threatens the organism from the death instinct” and that “anxiety has its origin in the fear of death” (Klein 1948, p. 28). She adds:

if we assume the existence of a death instinct, we must also assume that in the deepest layers of the mind there is a response to this instinct in the form of fear of annihilation of life . . . the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety. (p. 29)

Childhood is, of course, the time when we learn many of the lessons that we take with us throughout our lives. Meltzer (1955, p. 11) informs us that “the anxiety apparatus is a vital tool in the hands of the ego for the achievement of learning and the accomplishment of maturation” and that “the capacity of anxiety is innate in the mental apparatus” (p. 6). In the child’s very early years, when he is unable “to

distinguish body from external object, the infant cannot . . . experience yearning towards or frustration by, but only distress" (p. 6). This distress is closely linked to "two forms of anxiety, persecutory and depressive, (which) are the primitive forms and the prototypes for later objective and instinctual anxieties. The distinction between the primitive and mature forms is founded on the degree of reality underlying them" (p. 9). Anxiety for a child might occur at a moment of indecision, emotional imbalance or ambivalence: the moment when he understands that the mother who deserves his hatred is the same as the mother who deserves his love.

In more ways than the obvious (our subjugation to a superior Other occurring simultaneously with a transient sense of self-worth and power), we are all children understanding our mother's identity when we contemplate the World Wide Web. It is nigh-on impossible to ignore it, after all; it is easy to hate it for the time it wastes, for our slavish dependence on it; and yet, how we smile when we find that nugget of information! In the case of the latter, the cessation of anxiety is the result of an awareness of *jouissance* (see below for a section on Jacques Lacan, who popularised the term *jouissance* in psychoanalytic circles to mean a form of complicated happiness). Furthermore, the Internet can make us feel helpless; it takes on a parental function to reduce states of internal tension. To a certain extent, anxiety is a warning against insanity; also it is a soporific.

Meltzer tells us that our acquired anxieties are indeed based on expectations and predictions. "When the objects are not performing in the expected way—that is, when they have become bad and persecuting—the infant is unable to form a prospective phantasy of relief" (1955, p. 7); and "when a prediction that is of importance with regard to plans for relief of tension fails, the phantasy that results is of the current tension extended in time. The content of this phantasy will extend to eternity until a new prediction is formulated" (p. 9). Meltzer also points to the link between anxiety as a condition and the illness that it might precede. "But the warding off of anxiety is quite another matter," he writes. "Here the ego . . . adopts a policy never again to experience some specific anxiety phantasy and its affect. This is quite a serious determination, for such a policy implies the abandonment of maturation within the lifespace compartment involved. The result is a functional disease" (p. 11). Here, "affect" might be defined as an emotional response.

However, anxiety is a useful emotional commodity: it is more than the inappropriate switching on of a “flight or fight” response to deal with a threat to one’s survival—a threat that might not even exist. In common with the brains of our primitive forefathers, the brain scans one’s environment for threats but it cannot always tell the difference between a real threat and a perceived threat, and so both possibilities are treated in the same manner. A region in the brain called the amygdala “connects” the two situations and forms an unconscious memory of the association. When a stimulus occurs later, the amygdala is activated in the same way that it was in the presence of the original threat. Similarly, when one is in a situation somewhat like a situation of threat from the past, the brain notes the similarities and triggers the flight or fight response again, even if such a response is not called for. Anxiety might manifest itself as a sense of mounting physiological arousal, or as bodily and thinking symptoms—a headache, a stomach ache, the inability to recall something that is seemingly important. How, then, can anxiety be considered important in an educational milieu?

Building a relationship between motivation and anxiety, we might agree that one needs an optimal quantity of pressure under which to work and learn. One’s performance (linked to one’s sense of personal well-being) is achieved at a moderate level of emotional arousal: if the arousal is too little, the result is boredom, and if the arousal is too much, the result is anxiety. Both of these conditions will inhibit effective efficiency. But should this mean that no anxiety is the gold standard?

In *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Charles Rycroft (Rycroft, 1995, p. 8) writes that the “usual definition of anxiety as irrational fear applies strictly only to phobic anxiety, which is evoked by objects and situations such as open spaces, closed spaces, heights, spiders, snakes, thunder, travel, crowds, strangers, etc., to an extent which is out of all proportion to their actual danger”. Examining the category of phobic anxiety for a moment, a comparison is within easy reach, albeit a comparison on the level of metaphor. The “irrational fear . . . evoked by objects and situations” is one that we can imagine a student (or colleague) suffering, faced as he or she is by the situation of cloistered study in an online and possibly alien environment. The object is a screen on which unexpected material appears at the press of a button, or worse still fails to appear as a result of user ignorance; or the object is a keyboard, on which letters of the alphabet have been arranged in a peculiar order (especially if the student is not used to typing). In fact,

any individual item of the learner's hardware or physical environment—the mouse, the chair, the desk—can be elevated to the order of object in the mind of the anxious Fragile Learner. Then again, so can virtual objects—the icons, the on-screen folders that are difficult to unpack—and let us not forget the resonance of the word *object* itself, particularly when uttered in Freud's accent, with his influential and ghostly breath in our ear.

The examples that Rycroft uses, furthermore, are similarly apposite. Stripped down and seen in the light of a largely solitary experience, online learning is one person, a device, and a virtual doorway onto a cosmos of information. It is entirely understandable, surely, that a learner might regard this virtual open space—the Internet—with at least a modicum of agoraphobic tension. Indeed, it is an opinion that might well have been shared by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. Commenting on the anxiety of open spaces, he wrote:

Here fear is being itself. Where can one flee, where find refuge? In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a "horrible outside-inside". (Bachelard, 1964, p. 211)

Yet, ironically, the physical space in which the learner works—deprived of human interaction, for example—could easily provoke tensions of entirely the opposite, claustrophobic kind. The learners' irrational fear, however, is precisely of that which cannot harm him, which is one reason why it qualifies as an example of anxiety. Given that it is impossible to be directly harmed by the Internet (and as a slightly paranoid parenthetical aside, we might feel inclined to add the qualifier "yet", or "at the time of writing"); and given that it is impossible to hurt the Internet (as if it were a vast and sentient beast that could be speared), it is irrational for anyone to experience anxiety at its contemplation. Yet people do—our learners and our educator colleagues among their number. The anticipation of interfacing with something so immense, something so (theoretically) infinite, is awesome. It is bigger than the conceptual capacity of our brains, the vast majority of which we either fail to use or fail to understand anyway. Given that the Internet is a matrix of a million minds, a conglomerated record of the sum of human endeavour, and the resting place of more billions of dumb ideas and cretinacious ejaculations than there are stars in the Milky Way, it is impossible to contemplate boasting of comprehending but an infinitesimal nail-paring of our Internet.

What is more, it is expanding still. While listening to BBC Radio 4 on my journey to a work appointment on 4 February 2014, I heard that the Internet would be introducing new domain names in the near future. The reason for this was not (as one might have expected it to have been) solely the result of the Internet being full to capacity—as full of vibrant websites and dead links as an ocean is crammed with pulsating existence and dead grains of sand—but also the result of demand far outweighing demand in the case of specific industries requiring their industry-specific URLs. Or to put it another way, come the very near future, the proposition is that it will no longer be sufficient to expect (say) a bookstore to lug behind it an old-fashioned dot-com or dot-co-dot-uk domain handle. Certain sectors want to be known as (again, for example) as dot-books sites from now on. If we give it time, and if the inference we draw is correct, the Internet will eventually be crammed with dot-books, dot-banks, dot-music, and dot-sex sites, launched fresh and clean from the ashes of a previous World Wide Graveyard that is unlikely to tidied up this side of forever. The point surely must be more acute than a mere recognition of competing market forces: that bookstores would relish the altered economic gladiatorialism of a new Web arrangement is quite possibly no great surprise; nor is the fact that businesses with the same domain name (to a certain extent) even levels these same gladiatorial fields and pitches. What we have here, in addition, is an example of mutated epiphenomenalism. Where “traditional” epiphenomenalism espouses the view that mental events are caused by physical events in the brain, yet have no effects upon any physical events, what we might be encountering, as we plough the early spring fields of the twenty-first century, is a situation whereby the brain’s muscles have contracted after receiving their neural impulses, and the brain has now organised the movements of millions to its own ends. The brain, however, belongs to no single human mortal: the brain is the Internet itself, and it controls our times.

And time is also important to an appreciation of anxiety. Arguably, anxiety cannot “exist” or function without time—or rather, without one’s awareness of time. Even if the spell of anxiety exists only for a moment, there is likely to be an (unconscious) object from the past under mental consideration—a broken toy in one’s attic, as it were—and the shortest duration of anxiety-filled time nonetheless presupposes the notion of time passing via psychic reference to a moment that

might happen. By way of examples, let us consider the bereaved or the chronically chemically addicted: both groups (among many) are instructed to live one day at a time—or might tell others that this is the living pattern they have “chosen” to adopt. Whether we agree that such a perusal of the future in bite-sized chunks is a deterrent against anxiety, or whether we suspect that such a tactic, while no doubt useful for some, is for others an invitation to depression on the instalment plan. Therefore, taken literally, anxiety about the future is actually anxiety about both an unknowable entity and a fairly abstract concept. Given these qualifications, what we refer to is really a phobia—an irrational fear of something that is unlikely directly to harm you.

### *Interview two*

*Interviewer:* What is your experience of online learning?

*Subject 2:* Where do I start? Just from my personal point of view, my experience of it is only through my academic studies. We were introduced to a lot of online facilities because it's all about self-learning, and I suppose with the students I'm working with, they are encouraged and expected to do a bit of online learning to do their own research. In the job I have I didn't have, initially, too much involvement with that. I just left other lecturers to that, so the limited knowledge I have is from my own personal studies, when the lecturer has put course information online, so I have no choice—I can't avoid that. So I have to make myself learn to access that information and get by.

*I:* What courses have you been involved in with online learning?

*S2:* I have done the Postgraduate Diploma in Medial Education. I did the certificate to start with and then the diploma level. I'm embarrassed to say that to study at that level I should have a good knowledge of working online, but technology is not my strong point—I've always been frightened of it and I'm ignorant of how to navigate around those systems. When I click onto that page, where else do I go? What do I do? I suppose I'm not the adventurous type who would click on this just to see what happens. I'm from the old school where you learn from a text book; you go to the contents page to find what you want.

*I:* So do you think the course was badly designed?

*S2:* I don't think the course was badly designed; it's just that everything is going towards technology and computers and I'm just in this time-warp



and I haven't moved on. Much as I try, it's partly [that I have] no interest and partly I'm too scared. Also, there is the time factor, and finding someone who is patient enough to guide me through.

*I:* When you first thought about taking an online course, either as a student or as a teacher, how did you feel then?

*S2:* I dreaded it . . . but there is no choice in the matter, because the lecturer or the programme manager is saying, "The information for your course is online—log on and you'll get it." That freaked me out. It doesn't do me much good—my confidence—because I'm academic staff and yet I'm still struggling with that. It's come to a point where I ought to pack it in.

*I:* Pack in teaching?

*S2:* Yes. I know I'm a good teacher, and the way that I'm teaching is kinaesthetic, and the students benefit from it. Even yesterday, when we were doing simulation, they were asked in the feedback, what did you find most useful? And they answered, the session they did with me. And they left the room, all coming to me to say thank you. But it still doesn't give me any comfort because it's come to the point where (technology) is overriding all the good things I've done.

(*S2* starts crying.)

*I:* I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset.

*S2:* You didn't. It's not you.

(*S2* presents material not relevant to this paper.)

*S2:* Even online marking—I've taught myself and it's slow, but I got there, with some help from yourself and from colleagues. At least I got there, but my anxiety level is up again because the next course is coming up. Previously it was five contact days with the students, but now they've reduced that and two of the days are online. As a lecturer I have to get to grips with the online before I encourage my students. The last time I taught that, I just about managed to navigate my way in and show them and that's as far as I got. I just haven't got the guts to go in and participate in the way that [the course manager] would do and interact with the students and answer their questions. I feel a failure.

*I:* You've kind of answered this already, but . . . You said that you approached your online course with dread, but why do you think you felt that way?

*S2:* I feel I'm incapable, or haven't got the skills, to log in and explore what's available, whereas with a text book I know I can turn the pages.



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With online, you have to have the knowledge or the imagination to think, okay, where can I find that information?

*I:* But if you're not taught how to do these things, there's a lot of assumption that you'll know what to do.

*S2:* Over the years, working for the university, I do feel that that's one big gap, in the sense that it's taken for granted that you know. There isn't anyone who checks that you do have that knowledge. I suppose I've got to be accountable and say, I don't know this, and go find out. I find it very frustrating. As academics, we bend our backs backward to support our students—I would do anything for my students to ensure a smooth passage for them—but for the staff there isn't that induction period. For example, we are supposed to be putting information on [the Virtual Learning Environment] for the students. I know I can go on the courses (to teach aspects of the VLE) and I went on that, but the pace was so fast that I couldn't catch up. And in those days, there wasn't a need for me to use it frequently, so I soon forgot what I learned and I struggled again. I'm only learning on the hop because when I'm desperate I've got to do it—to learn it—at the last minute. I would love to be able to say I've got the leisure to go on a course. Work commitments do not allow me the time to do anything at all. I mean, a lot of my studies, I'm doing it on my own time or on holidays. I'm told I have five days to concentrate on my studies, but every time I plan something it gets cancelled because something has cropped up. And you've got to deal with it. So you put things on the back burner—you put it even further back in the drawer.

*I:* I think you've answered this, but I'll ask it anyway to keep things the same [with the other interviews]. Have your feelings changed since you started teaching in the online environment?

*S2:* My feelings about it—the anxieties and the fears—are still there. In fact, it's worse now—it's heightened—because I feel I'm being cornered into a situation where I have to get through it. It's either that or pack it in, because I hate to feel I'm doing a job and it's only fifty per cent. Or even seventy or eighty per cent. For me, if I'm doing something, it has to be one hundred per cent. Some days I know I'm being hard on myself, but I know if someone is relying on me to learn then I shouldn't disadvantage them. I know how it feels, as a student, to feel disadvantaged because you have to go online—you have no option—and I hate to think I'm disadvantaging my students this way. University students can get online and work it out, but the students on [a particular nursing course]—some of them are dinosaurs like me and I feel I have to help them. When I start on that course I always have to freak myself out by going on [the VLE] again—go

through a rehearsal, logging in, so then I can get one of the students who has anxiety like me, and ask them to log on. I prefer them to be in control of the mouse, even if it takes some time.

I: How do you feel about online learning now?

S2: It hasn't got any better. It's even more stressful now—it's got worse. It's making me feel even more incompetent.

I: How do you see online learning progressing in the future?

S2: I think this is how the world is going to be. It's going down this electronic pathway. It's about preparing people to accept that—to work with it. Maybe I'm a defeatist; I feel like a defeatist. I feel I'm too old to learn new tricks. Or maybe I'm too stupid or too daft to learn new tricks. If I haven't got anything better to do—if I'm retired—maybe it's something I'll enjoy, learning at my own pace. But the work demand is such that I haven't got that luxury to do that. For me as a learner, trying to get on with working online, it's like working in enemy territory. There are landmines everywhere and I don't know where to tread. I could be blasted off anywhere.

### *Anecdotal gobbet the second*

Every year I organise a writing retreat for colleagues at the university, on the first morning of which the participants are asked to describe, in less than two minutes, the history, rationale, and proposed publishing destination of the paper that they intend to finish drafting. Even though I am explicit upfront about the fact that there will be no PowerPoint available, it is interesting to note the high percentage of people who arrive wielding flashdrives and handouts. I explain that this is “old school”: that they will have to use words from their mouths and notions from their brains. The only visual aids permitted are what they might scribble or sketch at that moment.

Technology can be used as a shield, perhaps, but what happens (as it were) in the absence of E? A group of lecturers is confined to an atmosphere of first principles, under the gaze of colleagues who will almost certainly remain empathetic (because everyone will have a turn). The absence of E is an opportunity to rifle through old drawers, in search of tools that have not been used in years. The crutch is kicked away, and one is obliged to recall that there was a time when one did not need it in order to walk.

*Lacan's missing pieces*

"I have opposed the psychologising tradition that distinguishes fear from anxiety by virtue of its correlates in reality," writes Jacques Lacan (Lacan, 1990, p. 82). "In this I have changed things, maintaining of anxiety—it is not without an object."

We are entering Lacan's bizarre world (and I do not believe that he would have been offended by my adjective), in which his seminars played to packed venues and lasted one year each; in which his unorthodox methods in the analytic session led to his name being struck from a list of training analysts; and in which Woman does not exist—in which he proved, that is, via a scientific model of his own devising, that Woman (not women) does not exist. Irascible, brilliant, difficult (in every interpretation of the word and in every life context imaginable)—not to mention being a psychoanalytic law unto himself—Lacan has been envied, feared, ridiculed, and lauded for well over half a century; and although he has been three decades in the grave, the debates about his academic pugnacity *vs.* the feasibility of his snake-oil salesman ruminations rumble on.

Speaking and writing phenomenologically, Lacan states that

anxiety is an affect of the subject—a formula which I did not put forward without subordinating it to the functions that I have long established in the structure of the subject, defined as the subject that speaks and is determined through an effect of the signifier. (1990)

When we add the dimension of affect as an emotional state of being, the affect itself can be regarded as an indicator of one's reception of a transmission that emanates from without one's psychic apparatus. In Lacanian formulations, anxiety is not without an object—the object is *objet petit a*. In turn, the *objet petit a* (or "object petit a" . . . but always "petit a" and never, as we might translate it, "small A" or "lower case A") is the definite object, which is symbolic. "For the subject, there is substituted, for anxiety which does not deceive, what is to function by way of the object petit a" (Lacan, 1990). Lacan insisted that the term should remain untranslated, believing that it would acquire the status of an algebraic sign. (Lacan, we might reasonably infer from this alone, had sufficient supplies of antibodies against modesty—as might befit a psychoanalyst of whom more has been written than any

other practitioner bar Freud.) In objet petit a, the “a” stands for “*autre*” (other), and Lacan had developed it from the Freudian “object” and his own notions of otherness.

Encapsulating his ideas in miniature is like nailing water to a wall, but let us attempt to anyway, with the aid of an example. The object petit a is the thing to be anxious about and simultaneously the thing that is non-existent. It is the space between what the subject does not have and what he desires to have (the latter accompanied by the anxiety of desiring it). One might hear (or say) “I am anxious about my test tomorrow”. In this construction, Lacan would regard the test tomorrow as a replacement for the failure of the ego—the loss of the self. The test (in this example) becomes a symbolic image on to which we project the object petit a. At the root of our anxiety about tests (and this does not only apply to students in an exam hall either) is a fear of providing the wrong response—in turn, a by-product of a fear of being humiliated or shamed; of being seen in the open, stripped of any academic disguise. In Lacanian terminology, we might say that questions in general, and questions that one cannot answer in particular, can cause the erosion of the ego under the gaze of the Other.

In paranoia and schizophrenia, the Other occupies the position of an absolute other, and the subject, recognizing a lack in the Other but an unsymbolized one, attempts to complete the Other, since the Other's lack is unbearable, experienced as the destruction of the Other. This completion is achieved by the subject becoming the object of the Other's jouissance, the plaything of the Other . . .

So writes Leonardo S. Rodriguez in *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms* (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 26), a 220-page book that attempts to define Lacan's *terminology alone*.

In the same volume, a different writer, Huguette Glowinski attempts to explain it thus:

The subject apprehends a lack in the Other, something the Other wants. The subject locates his/her own lack at the point of lack perceived in the Other. The first object the subject proposes as the lost object or lack is him-/herself—can he/she *lost me?*—the fantasy of one's death or disappearance (the subject producing the lack in the Other following the course of the death drive). (Glowinski, 2001, p. 12)

For a third opinion, I refer to Renata Salecl's extraordinary work, *On Anxiety* (Salecl, 2004).

Fantasy and anxiety present two different ways for the subject to deal with the lack that marks him or her as well as the Other, i.e. the symbolic order. With the help of the fantasy, the subject creates a story, which give his or her life a perception of consistency and stability, while he or she also perceives the social order as being coherent and not marked by antagonisms. If fantasy provides a certain comfort to the subject, anxiety incites the feeling of being uncomfortable. However, anxiety does not simply have a paralysing effect. The power of anxiety is that it creates a state of preparedness, so that the subject might be less paralysed and surprised by events that might radically shatter his or her fantasy and thus cause the subject's breakdown or the emergence of a trauma. (p. 47)

Furthermore, in the words of the same author, "a computer, too, can be taken as a big Other—a new type of symbolic space" (Salecl, 2005, p. 158). Our Fragile Learner, we might infer, is simultaneously drawn to the anxiety-inducing computer (and, by extension, his or her studies) as a way of validating his or her academic image, and repulsed by the deficiencies that he or she finds staring back at her from the Internet's symbolic image. The Fragile Learner and the World Wide Web watch one another, enveloped in sensations of cosy gestation and alarming flashes of dread and hopelessness, wondering if he or she is good enough to embark upon the pedagogic journey that lies ahead.

The fact that Lacan elaborated on the notions contained herewith in a volume entitled "Television" (Lacan 1990) is interesting; possibly it even qualifies as irony (although irony is an elastic and elusive topic in psychoanalysis). Granted, he was not writing about television (the book is at heart a transcript of his appearance on television), but we might imagine, for a moment, that he had television very much on his mind. It is easy to be "soothed" by television (as it is with the Internet): people talk of it "relaxing" them . . . or to put it another way, of its ability to sedate and induce (at times) a state of near-catatonic cretinisation. One of the many characteristics of Lacan that we might infer is that he took it upon himself to confront the Fragile Learner. He made his students work hard; he assumed a huge stock of common knowledge before he began talking—and yet (or perhaps because of this gladiator-cum-circus-ringmaster pseud- and pseudo-arrogance) his students

adored him. They knew that he was on their side during the Parisian student riots in 1968. Confrontation was a certain antithesis to fragility.

### *Interview three*

*Interviewer:* What is your experience of online learning, either as a learner or as an educator?

*Subject 3:* As an educator, as you know, for the last two years we've had lots of blended learning—e-learning I call it—on to the [name of course] site. Working with that has been a big learning curve for me. The learners have to work through scenarios and answer questions, and they post their findings onto discussion boards. The scenarios are issues that are commonly found in practice. What I've found is there's been a real richness of replies and material they've posted, and certain sentences keep coming up—"I've never thought of this before" or "I didn't know this was so complicated". The amount of material they've written down, and their responses to the scenarios, has been very rich. I think they've learned more like that than [they would have] sitting in a classroom, having lecturers discussing these issues with them. So I've been really pleased with it. The problems I've had with it have been about my own inexperience with dealing with IT [Information Technology] myself and finding where they've actually posted their replies. It's been my ineptitude, and the fact that I have to explain to students something I'm not confident with myself. Some of them know more than I do about IT; some of them know less than I know about IT. So, I think, the problems have been technical, but the learning that has come out of it has been richer. That's where we are with it, really.

The interview was halted at this point for reasons irrelevant to this chapter.

### *Anecdotal gobbet the third*

More than a dozen years ago, with a different work hat on, I interviewed a writer for a magazine. The Twin Towers had recently fallen and I mentioned this in the interview. His response was that people needed to talk less to one another. Thirteen years later, we live in an age of mass loquacity, with hundreds of choices for ways to communicate, and it would be entirely feasible to spend an entire working

day answering e-mails (if you were not selective). Is this an improvement, I wonder? We certainly have more information than ever before—or rather, we have faster access to information that proliferates, gets diluted, gets reformed and recontextualised—and the “art” of information filtration becomes more and more a survival instinct or a coping mechanism than a conscious decision.

### *Steiner on hiding*

“The patient who has hidden himself in the retreat often dreads emerging from it because it exposes him to anxieties and suffering—which is often precisely what had led him to deploy the defences in the first place . . .” writes John Steiner (2011, p. 3), who continues to say that “the first and most immediate consequence of emerging from a psychic retreat is a feeling of being exposed and observed”.

Considered under a different psychoanalytic spotlight, we might regard Fragile Learners as people who want to improve their lot or as people who want to hide from what they perceive to be the rigid social demands of a classroom setting. In 1993, John Steiner published *Psychic Retreats* (Steiner, 1993)—a seminal text in psychoanalytic literature. Employing a careful balance of clinical and theoretical material, the author ratiocinated a proposal whereby a hard-to-reach patient will create mental sanctuaries and bastions against painful and unwanted reality. This effect is achieved via the adoption and manipulation of underlying pathological organisations of the personality; subordinating oneself to these organisations is a means of coping, of retreating—or of hiding.

Though Steiner’s rate of production in the years that followed might usefully be compared with that of an oyster, and though his oeuvre remains small, it is as perfectly formed as a pearl. Indeed, it is on his second full-length volume, *Seeing and Being Seen* (Steiner, 2011) that we might rely to gather some hints about our Fragile Learner in the online environment—and in an anxious state.

*Seeing and Being Seen*—a follow-up of sorts—has Steiner describing patients emerging from a psychic retreat, and concentrates on will-ingness, anxiety, shame and humiliation. Not for one moment would it be my intention to belittle or attempt to dilute the very real suffering that such patients must endure on a more or less uninterrupted

basis; however, I do believe that there is something analogous and of interest to note with reference to our Fragile Learner. Indeed, it is my contention that some learners (and some people in general) use the Internet as a place to hide, and not hide in the sense of simply spending time away from the “thick of it” or the “world at large” (and note the lexical choices of density and size when we describe something from which we wish to retreat). No: this is hiding in the sense of someone experiencing anxiety. This is the Fragile Learner, using the endless reaches of the Web, not only as a place to review his opinions of himself (and anything else)—and not only to revalidate himself in the eyes of others (or the Lacanian Other)—but to make himself small . . . to make of himself something tiny in a galaxy of soothing and useless beauty. Steiner writes that

using the notion of psychic retreats enables us to recognise that pathological organisations are also represented spatially as hiding places to which patients may withdraw. Within the retreat they feel sheltered from view, and from these hiding places their objects are also not clearly visible. These retreats may appear as phantasies that are sometimes visualised in dreams and other material as houses, castles, or fortresses but usually turn out to involve groups of people. Safety is then conferred by membership of a group or the protection of a powerful individual (Steiner, 2011, p. 3).

In Steiner’s formulation, who is in charge? Who is (as it were) the Fragile Learner’s projection of the punitive superego? “The observing figure is felt to be hostile, attacking the superiority of the narcissistic state and trying to reverse it so that the patient feels inferior” (p. 7); and what is more, “Sometimes the persecution is more feared than the physical attack” (p. 7)—which sums up the irrational nature of anxiety as well as anything. And just to prove that there is no one way to regard any of the above, Steiner writes:

Many psychic retreats are based on feelings of resentment, which are nursed and held on to because the patient does not have the confidence to emerge from the retreat and express them as hatred and a wish for revenge. (p. 12)

Paying due homage to Freud’s classic late paper, “Analysis terminable and interminable” (1937c), Steiner references “patients



who cling to their illness and defend it by every means possible. When this happens," he argues,

the patient's illness forms an essential part of the psychic retreat, and if the analyst is experienced as trying to help the patient, the pleasure of thwarting him may be more immediate than the satisfaction to be gained from change. (Steiner, 2011, p. 16)

Not only does the Fragile Learner have his own self-harming/self-protective instincts at heart and in play, he also yearns to punish those who would endeavour to help him. Therefore, at the same time as we consider why people hide, perhaps an equally appurtenant question would be: Why do people want to be seen? Why would they want to be seen? Why are we not more afraid of the Internet and of solitary confinement?

### *Conclusion*

A scarcely-believable seven years have passed since I left the job in Education Management at that Young Offenders' Institute and yet the anxiety sparks in the short circuits of my psychic apparatus, from time to time. During periods of looming deadlines or work pressures I still dream of being at school and being incapable of handing in my maths homework, of missed trains, planes, or boats—or of being locked in a classroom with ten murderers with identical facial features.

Why should this be?

As I mentioned above, anxiety might have something of a phobic quality about it. There is no chance that memories of that prison can harm me, and yet anxiety re-visits me from time to time—created from the psychic raw sewerage of night fears, the awareness of bills due, and the recollections of mistakes made. When we examine the transcripts of the brief interviews that I conducted, we see that the time that has elapsed between the subjects being told that they were to work online and the subjects' reflections on their endeavours, the results have been of muted success at best (with Subject 2 confessing that the duration has made her even more anxious than she had been at the beginning). Despite Subject 2's reference to herself as a "dinosaur", all three interviewees were competent academic practitioners, inside the somewhat

fuzzy parameters of what is usually called “middle age” (as is your author). Dwarfed by increases in work expectations, the subjects have shown that they are every bit as fragile as the Fragile Learner who cowers in skittish expectation of the next chapter in the book of their self-betrayal.

Such mistrust, however, can be harnessed; determined energy may be distilled from anxiety, even if it leaves us with an analyte of unknown concentration, subject to the metaphorical titration that is the work of our punitive superegos (whether we like it or not). This paper, having a string of negatives in its abstract, will conclude with more negatives, but not with negativity. If the mood throughout seems bleak, it has been hard to avoid the melancholy that has been part of a disappointment with online learning in certain quarters. Although successes in online learning are not rare, it would be easy to defend an opinion that online learning has not developed as we might have hoped—as quickly, as redefinably. Its accouchement might not have been exactly pain-free, but now that it has been with us for the better part of two decades, does it really seem any older than two years old? The tools have developed; connection speeds have improved . . . but contemporary distance learning is built on fundamental pedagogic principles as old as the human race.

So is anxiety. While I am not anxious about the future (not anxious as we have discussed the condition in this chapter, though concerns about ageing, loved ones and money are inevitable), I have given the examples of three interviewees who referred to their notions of time passing, in one way or another, as pertinent ingredients in their anxieties. Of course, this was hardly surprising, given the questions that they were asked; but even so, it is worth noting. Anxiety is more than their fear of change, these colleagues and our Fragile Learners alike: anxiety is the troubled glimpse of what has not or cannot come to pass, addressing an academic system in a solitary position. Perhaps it qualifies as irony the fact that with our Fragile Learners dispersed around the globe, it might be the very condition that is dreaded—anxiety—that it is the thing that they all share in common.

## The Internet is Unwell

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